

Intimations of Intellectual Disability in Nineteenth-Century British Literature

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ABSTRACT

PAUL R. MARCHBANKS: *Intimations of Intellectual Disability
in Nineteenth-Century British Literature*
(Under the direction of Beverly Taylor and Weldon Thornton)

Mental retardation and autism spectrum disorders do not yet command the same critical attention as sensory or mobility impairments. Rosemary Garland Thomson's *Extraordinary Bodies* (1997) set a precedent from which few have deviated, deftly including intellectual disability in a taxonomy for disability studies without exploring the subject in depth. My project addresses such continued oversight by turning to the pivotal nineteenth century, a period when promising medical innovation was outpaced by increasingly isolationist institutional practices and dehumanizing, proto-eugenicist systems of thought. A few writers moved against this powerful current, interrogating their own prejudices as they created progressive visions of the intellectually disabled in close, interdependent communion with an able-minded majority.

The project opens with an examination of how individuals with cognitive disabilities provided the people of an increasingly powerful nation with a useful yardstick against which to measure their industrial and social progress. It then considers Mary Shelley's deconstructions of monstrosity within the context of a pervasive physiognomic practice. Charles Dickens's increasingly non-stereotypic portrayals of the *idiot*, the Brontë sisters' visions of domestic care for the mentally disabled and mentally ill in a time of growing

institutionalization, and Robert Browning's critique of proto-eugenicist and intellectist ideology, as well as his refined use of terms like "idiot" and "imbecile."

DEDICATION

This project is dedicated to my wife and daughters, to the wonderful trio whose unwavering affection and invaluable encouragement carried me forward across six years of research and writing. Thank you.

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Chapter One

An Imaginative Space, a Welcoming Place

What ought all civilised people to do with their women? It seems very easy to go on driving down the “high *à priori*” road of equal rights for all human beings, but, as it is quite clear that children and idiots cannot be entrusted with full civil and political rights, the question always resolves itself into the further one; where shall we draw the line? When has a human being fairly passed out of the stage of pupilage, and attained his majority?¹

In what has become a seminal essay on the married woman’s lack of property rights in nineteenth-century England, Frances Power Cobbe underscores a grave economic injustice by differentiating between those disenfranchised populations who “it is quite clear” do *not* merit full legal and public recognition, and a similarly sidelined group whose junior status has been unnaturally, wrongly prolonged. Women constitute the real focus of an essay whose title teasingly suggests a space shared by “Criminals, Idiots, Women and Minors” alike. First published in *Fraser’s Magazine* in 1868, then selected by Susan Hamilton in 1995 to headline a collection of feminist writings by Victorian women, the provocatively named essay has very little to do with “idiots” or their concerns. Instead, it reifies contemporary prejudices against those with intellectual disabilities by including the population in a larger category *against which* women will be justified. This rhetorical strategy anticipates that of some modern feminists who, as Rosemary Garland-Thomson objects in *Extraordinary Bodies* (1997), link femaleness with various disabilities in order to underscore the crippling pressure of social inequality, a metaphorical process which unfortunately relies on the disabled to signify unequivocal deficiency.² Where women and those with *physical* differences have in recent years earned

recognition as politically viable entities with justifiable grievances, however, little attention has yet been accorded those with *intellectual* disabilities. Medical knowledge about what we alternatively label “cognitive,” “developmental,” or “mental” disabilities (as distinguished from “mental illness” or “*psychiatric* disability”) has improved dramatically across the last two centuries. Tacit, systemic prejudices against this population remain, however, manifesting themselves in everything from selective abortion practices and domestic abuse, to public displays of outrage against local governments and hospitals that encourage community residential options for intellectually disabled individuals within, say, one’s own neighborhood. This should not surprise, given that western society has “draw[n] the line” of social demarcation in front of this particular population since well before the Victorian period, working to insure that such individuals remain forever in a “state of pupilage.” Whether such individuals’ deficits will always disqualify them from fuller civic, political, and professional partnership with a highly articulate and educated elite, or whether an increasingly inclusive polity will instead embrace this population’s unique experience and contributions as valuable, remains to be seen.³

Patterns and Precedents: Society and Ideology in the Nineteenth Century

How far we must travel before finally achieving such radical egalitarianism becomes clearer when one considers how close our own society stands to that century whose stiff moral codes and divisive social hierarchies we like to assume we abandoned long ago. The truth is, those delimiting, prejudicial standards that today exclude the intellectually disadvantaged from both casual and professional circles resemble rather closely their late-Romantic and Victorian antecedents. Then, as now, this disabled population served the public imagination in rather convenient ways. Then, as now, the time-consuming exploration of individual complexities took

a back seat to the attractive ease of over-simplification and categorization. Medical pundits might have squabbled over what exactly constituted “idiocy,” and clinical practitioners occasionally erred when distinguishing the intellectually disabled from the mentally ill, but the culture at large retained a clear sense of what idiots and imbeciles represented in relation to itself. They epitomized the *not-self*, an ultimate “other” defined, not by what they were, but by their distance from some socially constructed ideal. The sexually depraved Frenchman of nationalist myth, the technologically and culturally backward subject of colonial Africa, and the crippled young Englishman unable either to soldier in India or work in Britain might handily represent *single* objectionable characteristics against which industrialized, imperialist England could measure its progress, but the readily accessible, home-grown idiot could embody all these shortcomings in a single, highly identifiable package. Every town and hamlet, that is, contained at least one village imbecile, someone whose inadequacies earned him such unenviable roles as object of fun, scary enigma, or handy target for ostentatious acts of philanthropy. The idiot and the imbecile presented a familiar problem, one that demanded a concrete solution. Feared and mocked as the embodiment of all things retrograde, they needed to be either improved and assimilated through therapy and education, classified by the state as lost causes deserving of the community’s condescension or, perhaps, just hidden away in either institutions or the remotest of back rooms.

That this population stood in dire need of something would not have been such an affront to the prosperous, increasingly powerful nation and its developing sense of self, if only the idiot and imbecile had not required such *unremitting, outside* intervention. The early nineteenth century was witnessing an Enlightenment-renewed faith in humanity’s ability to solve age-old social, philosophical, and medical problems, a new hope that what had once seemed inexplicable

could finally be reasoned through and “solved.” Hot on the heels of *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1793), William Godwin’s infamously cold and rational formula for eliminating the world’s social inequities, came the innovative York Retreat and William Tuke’s confidence that mental illness too could be reduced under just the right treatment conditions, a perspective rehashed in his grandson’s later assurance that the presence of lunacy—a kind of *mental* injustice—could be traced back to certain, preventable social ills including drink, fatigue, and stress.⁴ Similarly, John Barlow maintained in *Man’s Power over Himself to Prevent or Control Insanity* (1849) that will power alone, expressed through a “habit of self-government,” could prevent “nervous affection” in most situations.⁵ Though Tuke and Barlow promoted “moral management”—a more compassionate and personalized system of therapy that eliminated the physical restraints and abuses of the eighteenth century—both practitioners’ faith in humanity’s powers of self-control ultimately put the onus for successful change on the *individual*. Assistance might be required temporarily, and new cognitive and behavioral patterns prove difficult to enforce initially, but these men and many of their contemporaries believed that most troubled individuals could shape their own mental destinies. The lasting popularity of Samuel Smiles’s *Self-Help* (1859), the first in a successful series of books heralding the material benefits of optimism and hard work, demonstrates the degree to which individualism had become “a prophylactic against insanity” in an era of “Psychiatric Romanticism.”⁶ If something psychological misfired, the cause and solution necessarily lay with the malfunctioning individual. If one’s indecorous behavior, poor grooming habits, impaired speech, and tendency towards unprovoked displays of intense emotion could not be corrected or at least substantially curtailed—and many individuals with intellectual disabilities would have found such self-regulation difficult—then s/he was of peripheral interest to society and even more limited use.

Even the egalitarian idealism of a democracy, that is, had its limits; England's halting advance towards more comprehensive political representation would suffer the many slings and arrows of pride and outrageous national ambition. The imperialist enterprise required able-bodied, relatively clear-headed and fertile men who, upon reproducing themselves in their beds and towns, could move overseas to meet the crises of the distant battlefield. Whether at home or work, in the factory or the military troupe, contemporary exigencies demanded those who could follow directives to a tee. For the larger organism to function appropriately, it required properly functioning, loyal progeny. Autonomous citizens must be created in perpetuity, individuals with the creative independence encouraged by Samuel Smiles and the fiscal foresight required by Adam Smith's increasingly influential theories of *laissez-faire* economics. As historian Franklin Baumer suggests, the nineteenth century was moving from a complacent faith in *being* towards a passionate desire to *become*.⁷ The old assumption that divinely molded creatures had been assigned narrowly prescriptive roles in a created, relatively static social order was yielding to a conviction that individuals had a responsibility to better themselves, their position, and their society. The culture simply found little advantage in accommodating those disabled individuals unable to contribute substantially towards the public's material and economic well-being.

Even Jeremy Bentham's seemingly egalitarian *utilitarianism*, a potent economic philosophy that professed to champion the good of the many over that of the few, spawned decidedly *divisive*, socially fragmentary decrees. One of its more infamous, the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834, purported to discourage able-bodied indolence by tying nutritional and financial relief to labor completed within parish workhouses. Instead, the new prescription ended up stigmatizing individuals with far different, much less malleable personal characteristics than laziness. Within only a few years, the vast majority of those in workhouses were either

intellectually disabled, mobility impaired, sick, elderly, or widowed, a diverse group united by their outsider status and their unmistakable association with government hand-outs—an affiliation which made them even less attractive to the communities that had already pushed them to the social periphery.

Within some families, highly dependent and socially embarrassing relatives found themselves sidelined because an *appearance of well-being* had become a valuable commodity for a rising middle-class anxious to separate itself from its working-class roots. Whether receiving guests in a well-furnished parlor, paying membership fees for the local subscription library, or riding in a carriage instead of walking through the refuse-filled streets of industrialized London, many a parvenu was motivated as much by affectation as affection, knowledge, or a concern with health. The capricious behavior and indecorous appearance of an intellectually disabled child or relative would have been an uncomfortably conspicuous feature in a household preoccupied with what Wilkie Collins's Madame Pratolungo censures as that "English spectre called propriety."⁸ Even when well-groomed and affable, a disabled family member might still present an awkward spectacle. Poor articulation, impaired mobility, or an unusually shaped face and figure would likely elicit questions, uncomfortable silences, and unwanted stares. If a guest accompanied the gaze with an effort at character analysis, what started as rudeness could swiftly become justified curiosity, prolonging by legitimating their discourteous scrutiny. This physiognomic practice of reading character into facial characteristics, a practice formalized by Caspar Lavater late in the previous century, provided a diverting pastime for Europeans throughout the nineteenth. Though gradually discredited, the system retained enough influence to shape medical texts like John Langdon Down's *The Physiognomy of Insanity* (1858), and vestiges of it would inform the theories of criminologist Cesare Lombroso well into the 1890's.

Medical professionals' interest in mapping the telltale "wandering eye," "imbecilic expression," "unmeaning grimace," and "vacant look" was matched by society's own penchant for pseudo-psychological sleuthing.⁹ For families sympathetic to the Godwinian notion that a great thinker's life far outweighs that of a manual laborer, or to the later, social Darwinian belief that the fittest body and mind would and should survive in a hostile world, a relative with abnormal features and behaviors might have been deemed a burden first and family member second—an atavistic hanger-on likely to pull one backwards towards the social ignominy of one's uneducated, unrefined forbears.¹⁰

Down and Darwin rode the crest of a scientific revolution sweeping across the nineteenth century. These and other influential thinkers owed their attentive audience at least in part to the growing credibility accorded *empiricism*, an influence felt in medicine, religion, economics, politics, and business alike; even altruistic organizations like the Charity Organisation Society (COS) became "obsessively concerned with the placement of charity on a 'scientific' basis."¹¹ Discrete numbers, classification systems, and experimentally verifiable examples were now required before a theory could hold sway or a project receive financing. The supposed objectivity of science also held out a tantalizingly solid foothold for the confused masses living in a fluctuating cultural landscape. Significant changes in familial and communal structures, living conditions, and religious belief spawned deeply-rooted anxiety in many. With spiritual verities dissolving in the face of shocking scientific and anthropological dramas, and tightly knit homes and communities rupturing under the force of an industrial movement which widened the gap between domestic and occupational spheres, those anxious for signs of social progress sometimes turned to reports of the country's scientific, economic, and colonial achievements for reassurance.

As suggested earlier, English society's process of identity formation involved multiple points of reference, signposts around which the nation could plot the course of its own evolution. The theories of Victorian polymath Francis Galton contributed to this process of sociological mapping by illuminating what he decided were some of the more dangerous, developmental pitfalls into which his species had repeatedly fallen. Inspired by his earlier investigations into "the mental peculiarities of different races," Galton's *Hereditary Genius* (1869, 1892) broadened his program of social dissection to encompass not only race, but gender and mental difference.¹² He included only British males in his study (referring to women infrequently, usually as "relatives" or "mistresses" of the subjects under review) and reiterated racist distinctions between the "highest Caucasian" and the "lowest savage" as he pursued his new, central quest: the codification of a desperately needed *intellectual* hierarchy.¹³

Modern academia's reliance on time-saving college-entrance exams which claim to assess intellect and predict performance can be traced back to Galton, remembered today as the architect of the *intelligence quotient* (I.Q.). Beginning with the common assumption that there "can hardly be a surer evidence of the enormous difference between the intellectual capacity of men than the prodigious differences" evidenced by university exam scores, Galton traveled along a path of loose suppositions to the conclusion that subsequent professional eminence can also be linked directly back to intellectual capacity (45-46, 58). His condescending course of inference illustrates the pernicious predilection of many Victorians for what David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder have christened "taxonomic catalogs of deviancy" and Michel Foucault once sarcastically termed "pathological fortunes."¹⁴ Unfortunately, this appetite for classification systems led Galton and others towards a problematic endgame with insidious implications for those with cognitive disabilities.

The early eugenicist boldly declared his hope that politicians and sociologists would heed his study's conclusions and begin to reverse that intellectual "degradation of human nature" produced by "social agencies of an ordinary character, whose influences are little suspected."¹⁵

In the preface to his second edition of *Hereditary Genius*, Galton proposes that:

The brute power of doing this by means of appropriate marriages or abstention from marriage undoubtedly exists, however much the circumstances of social life may hamper its employment. The great problem of the future betterment of the human race is confessedly, at the present time, hardly advanced beyond the stage of academic interest, but thought and action move swiftly nowadays . . . The striking results of an evil inheritance have already forced themselves so far on the popular mind, that indignation is freely expressed, without any marks of disapproval from others, at the yearly output by unfit parents of weakly children who are constitutionally incapable of growing up into serviceable citizens, and who are a serious encumbrance to the nation. The questions about to be considered may unexpectedly acquire importance as falling within the sphere of practical politics . . .¹⁶

Galton bypasses the dangers inherent in governmental control of procreation by casting as far more menacing the degraded state of a species whose self-awareness has not yet rescued it from an "evil inheritance." This inheritance—physically and intellectually disabled children whom Galton considers chiefly as a drain on national resources—thus becomes a symbol of societal decline, the handicapped population metonymically standing in for a larger, national affliction caused by its own existence. Galton's coldly mechanist model is tempered by no admission of the interdependent nature of industry and commerce, the artistic creation's reliance on heterogeneity and difference, or the qualitative character-building benefits often conferred on those who work with the disabled. The economy he envisions would regard the compromised mind or body as useless, the individual unable to deliver a certain quantifiable product or service, as disposable.

Public Policy and Medical Practice: Mixed Results

Galton's pseudo-scientific, segregative system of categorization sprang into being the more readily during the late Victorian period given decades of political and institutional precedent. During the Middle Ages, the king's officials had spent little time trying to detect and categorize idiots (or the insane), considering such intellectual distinctions primarily when protecting a vulnerable individual's legal rights to property and inheritance, or perhaps when determining one's culpability in committing a crime.¹⁷ In the late eighteenth century, the government and public rapidly became more concerned about discovering and delineating mental difference, motivated by an odd mix of fear and compassion. The celebrated mental illness of George III (which first manifested in 1789) prompted some of this interest, as did James Hadfield's assassination attempt on the king in 1800, a crime that led to the unique verdict of "not guilty by reason of insanity" and the passage of the Act for Safe Custody of Insane Persons Charged with Offences.¹⁸ Around the same time that the aristocracy's difficulties became a public spectacle, another furor was being raised by investigations into a number of poorly run, exploitative private madhouses. During the early 1790s, a purple press campaign unearthed the rampant mishandling of suffering patients, helping to raise public interest further and prompting new legislation at the turn of the century. The Madhouses Act of 1774, an early and limited effort by parliament to curtail patient abuse by requiring the "registration and regulation" of private madhouses, was followed by the County Asylums Act (1808), which encouraged (but did not mandate) the creation of public asylums for "dangerous idiots and lunatics"; concurrent regulations concerning the medical certification of inmates in charitable mental hospitals; and, in 1845, proposals for tighter regulations of private institutions.¹⁹ As suggested by this sampling of the period's laws, the public's growing awareness of and concern

about mentally disabled patients led to inevitably delimiting distinctions at the same time that they led to (temporarily) improved treatment conditions.

The claims of medical practitioners interested as much in grandiloquent gestures as the actual treatment of their newly categorized patients helped accelerate this programme of social and medical demarcation. In *Outlines of Mental Diseases* (1824), Alexander Morison widens the perceived gap between idiots and the able-minded majority by employing melodramatic scare tactics. He attempts to frighten his reader by adding to an already long list of possible causes of idiocy the pregnant woman's experience of violent emotions and hard labor, and also by encouraging his audience to take "every precaution . . . to prevent idiots from procreating," thereby slowing the increase of a population "frequently given to steal" and "sometimes made the instruments of crimes by villains."²⁰ At the same time that he widens the conceptual divide between the able-minded and those with cognitive differences, he works to subdivide intellectual disability itself into restrictive, ever-narrowing categories of mental difference which he aligns with inauspicious physical, mental, and behavioral characteristics. Adopting the traditional division between imbecility and idiocy, he distinguishes sharply between congenital and "acquired" idiotism so that he can then create a further (misleading) distinction between acquired idiotism that is permanent and that which he claims can be remedied.²¹ George Man Burrows corrects this last kind of distinction in *Commentaries on Insanity* (1828) by noting that any recovery of a patient's mental faculties points to dementia (not idiocy), but then derogates and implicitly isolates the mentally disabled individual by speaking dramatically of an "absolute" and "irremediable" condition "depraved" by more than just the "vices and moral impressions" that accompany mental illness.²² James Cowles Prichard, arguably the most histrionic (definitely the most offensive) of the medical practitioners surveyed by Vieda Skultans in *Madness and Morals*:

Ideas on Insanity in the Nineteenth Century (1975), anticipates some of the elitist assumptions that will ride in on the coattails of Darwin's evolutionary theories in the latter half of the century. In *On the Different Forms of Insanity in Relation to Jurisprudence* (1847), Prichard moves a step beyond the physiognomic mapping of French artist Charles le Brun, finding in the purportedly bestial features of his idiotic patients indications of not only temperament, but intellect. Prichard eagerly reports the case of an "ape-faced idiot . . . of the lowest order" with "a mischievous brute-like intelligence in his eye," then moves on to a "deformed idiot girl who, in general appearance and habits, has . . . striking features of resemblance to a goose."²³ Such fantastic comparisons might have entertained Prichard's peers, but they could hardly have provided the profession with useful information.

Attempts at diagnostic division kicked into high gear in 1845 when the new County Asylums Act and Lunatics Act formalized a process for identifying and distributing the country's many cognitively disabled and mentally ill. The County Asylums Act turned what had previously been a largely disregarded suggestion into a loud demand, *requiring* that each borough and county provide public-funded asylum residence for its pauper lunatics. The Lunatics Act, considered by some a "defining piece of legislation" in Victorian socio-medical history, reified an already common, tripartite separation of the "insane" into mentally ill *lunatics*, incurably disabled *idiots*, and less severely disadvantaged *persons of unsound mind*, parsing out these subgroups still further into those who were "dangerous" and should be immediately removed to county asylums for safety reasons, and those "curable" individuals who would presumably benefit from treatment there.²⁴ Though the law promised to provide asylum accommodations for all of the insane—idiot and lunatic alike—the newly created Lunacy Commission gradually acquitted itself of any real responsibility for the "quieter" insane, those

many idiots and lunatics already congregating in the country's severely overcrowded Poor Law Union workhouses. The Lunatics Amendment Act of 1853 simplified the partition process further by asking the doctors and family members who completed the adjusted Certificate of Insanity to commit themselves to a particular classification of the patient, one bolstered by their own supporting evidence.²⁵ This tendency towards delimiting categorizations would culminate in the eugenics-era Mental Deficiency Act of 1913—with its additional division of “persons of unsound mind” into “feeble-minded” and “moral defective”—before finally dissolving into a new, infinitely more graduated scale with the provisions of the integration-minded British Mental Health Act of 1959.²⁶

In the meantime, the growing push to institutionalize and treat the mentally disabled and mentally ill would yield mixed results. Idiots were still pretty easily identified and habitually ejected from mental hospitals such as Bethlem (or “Bedlam”) where nurses, working together with a supervisory sub-committee, implemented a “relatively rigidly imposed exclusion policy” in place since at least the sixteenth century.²⁷ It was some time before the moral management approach conceived by William Tuke in the 1790s, which had inspired asylum administrators like John Connolly to replace physical restraints with alternative forms of teaching self-control, began to impact care of those *idiots* and *imbeciles* not living with their families. Most of them still resided in workhouses or lived a vagabond's life in the countryside. It was not until the late 1840s, with the opening of the Earlswood Asylum for idiots, that England could finally boast an idiot institution within its own borders devoted to moral treatment and a more humanizing system of behavior management, the tardy result of provocative, inspiring efforts on the continent. Johann Jakob Guggenbühl's acclaimed study of cretinism on Switzerland's Abendberg mountain, conducted well above those miasmatic swamps blamed for that disabled

population's growing numbers, generated thrilling reports about apparent *cures* which enthralled the European public (including such interested parties as Charles Dickens) until they were finally exposed as fraudulent.²⁸ The scrupulous work of Édouard Séguin at the Bicêtre Hospital in Paris boasted less dramatic but more reliable results, including evidence that idiots could be taught to make increasingly fine distinctions among different colors and numbers. His work and a series of treatises published later in the decade sparked activism in a number of influential physicians in England. These included John Connolly, who in 1846 observed Séguin's *modus operandi* personally, and Samuel Gaskell, a superintendent of the Lancaster Lunatic Asylum whose own visit to France inspired three separate articles in the *Chambers' Edinburgh Journal*—each of whom espoused the creation of educational institutions for idiotic and imbecilic children.²⁹

David Wright's *Mental Disability in Victorian England: The Earlswood Asylum 1847-1901* (2001), an examination of the first years of this privately funded asylum for the intellectually disabled, provides a useful picture of the rather uneven course taken by the English in their attempts to formalize care of the idiot population. The launch of the country's first institution for idiots in 1848 appeared promising enough. John Connolly transferred the moral management techniques he had successfully applied at the Middlesex County Lunatic Asylum in Hanwell to the new asylum when it opened its doors at a small facility in Highgate. As consulting physician to the charity which funded the asylum, Connolly oversaw the training of those who implemented the institution's humane, individualized care, and trained the man who would become his most famous disciple, John Langdon Down. By the time Down stepped into the position of medical superintendent in 1858, the asylum had already outgrown two different locations—an indicator of both the institution's success and the public's increasing demand for

its services. The Park House asylum in Highgate had filled in only two years; a new facility in Essex Hall, Colchester had opened in 1850 to absorb another large group of both private patients and those elected by the charity's board; and in 1855, the Earlswood board had frantically moved the overflow from both sites into the partially constructed, new facility on Earlswood Common in Surrey. The accommodations would not be fully completed or the institution receive its Royal Charter for another eight years, but the public's growing desire for places they could put the more burdensome of their denizens had provoked desperate measures. By 1881, the Earlswood Asylum was bursting at the seams (holding about ten percent more mentally disabled patients than it was built to hold). Overcrowding, and the concomitant quality of care problems which accompanied this futile attempt to stay ahead of the demand curve, mirrored the deplorable conditions facing the mentally *ill* in the country's relatively new, already bulging county asylums. It almost seemed as though the creation of a few viable alternatives for the management of the mentally challenged had fed the public's impatience with providing such care themselves, inadvertently creating a demand for services that would outgrow supply for some time to come.

Not that *all* families eagerly rid themselves of difficult, time-intensive children and relatives. David Wright's historiography works hard to temper the prevailing pessimism of those like Michel Foucault who represent the entire culture as complicit in the mass institutionalization of its unwanted members.³⁰ Wright's careful research suggests that many of the idiots and imbeciles cared for by their parents in "pre-institutional" England remained at the hearth even after special asylums were up and running. Mothers, daughters, and the occasional hired nurse usually played the role of long-term caregiver, helping to groom, manage behavior, and restrict movement to the family property.³¹ When families did decide to commit the idiot in their midst,

they often did so out of necessity (twice as many male idiots were institutionalized as female idiots, in part because of the greater physical danger they sometimes presented to the household), and parents remained closely involved with the certification process (81, 90, 60-61, 48). Additionally, they often said their goodbyes with expectations that their departing son or daughter would return before long: charitable idiot asylums habitually set about a five-year time limit on both the subsidized and private patients whom their board elected for care, thereby realizing a policy “designed to incorporate a training and educational rather than strictly curative or custodial function” (91, 82). As Wright maintains,

It would be facile . . . to conclude that ‘respectable families’ happily resorted to institutional confinement to conceal embarrassing relatives. When one analyses the length of stay from the admission registers, one does not see the unequivocal ‘dumping’ of unwanted household members. (76)

At the same time, Wright recognizes that institutional innovations in the late Victorian period ran alongside pervasive and counterproductive—markedly inequalitarian—systems of thought. The 1860s saw the opening of one Scottish and two more English charitable asylums for idiots, the publication of the groundbreaking *A Manual for the Classification, Training and Education of The Feeble-Minded, Imbecilic and Idiotic* (1866) by William Millard and P. Martin Duncan, and John Langdon Down’s successful organization of the very first medical conference on idiocy in 1867. The decade also, however, witnessed the publicizing of Down’s infamous, ethnically charged classification system for intellectual disabilities. His essay in the *Journal of Medical Science*, published the same year as Down’s conference and just two years before Galton’s own racially charged study hit the market, divided the Earlswood Asylum population into subsets whose disorders presumably mimicked “primitive” characteristics of, alternately, “Malay,” “Ethiopian,” “Aztec,” “Caucasian,” and “Mongolian” ethnic groups.³² Down’s

theories also contributed to the medical field's growing consensus that idiocy signaled more a despicable disease than a trainable condition—a disease that should be isolated and, if possible, removed from the genetic pool. The newly founded Charity Organisation Society (COS) ironically did little to slow this downward slide. The attention they brought to the newly labeled, less disabled “feeble-minded” population helped create a number of special schools for these individuals' education, but the rhetoric of the National Association with which the COS collaborated emphasized *protecting* the rest of society as much as *helping* the feeble-minded (182-87).

By century's end, the situation had deteriorated still further, the optimism of moral management and social reform fading away in the face of social Darwinism, proto-eugenics, and inescapable economic realities. The 1845 Acts which had created additional asylums for the mentally ill had never produced equivalent, publicly funded spaces for the many idiots and imbeciles who continued to maintain an undeniably “inferior position in the psyche of Victorian lunacy reform (21). Most of those with intellectual disabilities who lacked community support remained packed into local workhouses; only a few, usually those with proactive parents, made it into the new charitable institutions. Some were denied entrance because they were not deemed educable by an election board preoccupied with providing proof of a strong worth ethic and a new semblance of intellect in their residents. Other idiots and imbeciles were eliminated from consideration because of additional infirmities that complicated their treatment, conditions including epilepsy, generalized weakness, and profound physical disabilities (88-89). Those few who did make it into facilities like Earlswood were actually trained in such common crafts as needlework and tailoring—in addition to more basic skills like grooming and counting—but even these vocational talents were of limited value (146-48). As Wright points out, the highly

regimented schedule which helped an institution's occupants regulate their daily lives could actually work against that institution's stated end-goals in the long run:

[T]he very notion of a unitary structure at Earlswood Common, the large size of the asylum, and its inherent 'institutional' routine undermined one of its fundamental purposes—namely, to educate the idiot and imbecile children in domestic and vocational skills in order to return them to their communities and family environments. Surely no adolescents would find in this institutional life anything comparable to that which they could reasonably expect back in the household of an artisan or small shopkeeper. Moreover, the asylum seems to have made no attempt to evaluate whether the teaching of a specific trade to an individual would in fact be useful once he or she was returned to his community. (153-54)

Many such residents also faced an increasingly problematic situation within the institution's walls, well before their release. The gradual accumulation of a few chronic, long-term patients each year translated into a higher patient-to-nurse ratio and, accordingly, a more custodial environment that was marked by declining treatment and residential conditions (91-94). By the 1880s, it was clear that the promises of the 1840s had been only imperfectly realized.

Ideologues: Philosophy and Literature

Nineteenth-century efforts to improve conditions for the intellectually disabled were not a total failure. True, the segregative courses of action taken by certain doctors, scientists, and politicians in the name of a "greater good" for the general population would culminate in the eugenics of the early twentieth century, but not all professionals surfed the waves of expediency flooding contemporary research and thought. Nor should we forget that the practitioners and lawmakers fashioning guidelines for managing this population were influenced by certain clear and present factors immaterial to those writers whose primary workplace was their own skull, not the local sanitarium. It is far easier to avoid discriminatory practices oneself when

unhindered by the prejudice-making pressures of pragmatics and politics, when apprehensions about funding, space, public safety, and national pride do not constantly crowd about one's ideas, constricting optimism and whittling away at visions of a better society.

Adam Smith and John Locke, Enlightenment-era philosophers whose writings profoundly shaped some of the nineteenth-century's greatest novelists and poets, did not allow their sobering knowledge of human behavior and societal constraints to overwhelm their progressive visions—to prevent them from separating out what is from what could be. By taking issue with western society's traditional veneration of autonomy, reason, and physical beauty—and by directly, if briefly, critiquing contemporary attitudes towards the intellectually disabled themselves—both writers contributed to the creation of a social imaginary more congenial towards and accommodating of such individuals.

Philosopher and economist Adam Smith, a university instructor and political official who in *The Wealth of Nations* (1776) would popularize the notion that *self-interest* and government non-intervention could provide healthy regulation of market forces, first published a treatise encouraging a more interdependent and openly sympathetic type of community. In his *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), Smith promotes a distinctly inclusive and collaborative societal ideal, one receptive of those with physical and intellectual differences. He does admit, even this early in his theorizing, to humanity's troublesome egoism—to our inability to fully understand another's emotion, and to the sad necessity of judging another's personal characteristics by the measure of our own (22, 18). He also, however, claims for his species certain innate qualities that encourage us to accept those different from ourselves: every human is “naturally sympathetic,” Smith writes, a quality he refuses to dismiss “as a selfish principle” (22, 465). Unfortunately, each individual's process of identity formation tends to be guided

more by the artificial creation of distinctions, of unnecessary and divisive social hierarchies, than by the discovery of commonalities. And though we have within us some kind of moral core—a desire for not only “being approved of,” but for “being what *ought* to be approved of”—the two impulses do not always work together (170, my emphasis). Communal pressures can generate synthetic, stratifying concerns about beauty and physiognomy: “we are anxious about our own beauty and deformity, only upon account of its effect upon others. If we had no connection to society, we should be altogether indifferent about either” (163). In the same way, those whose intellectual deficiencies accompany more apparent, physical differences often “rate themselves still more below [the common level] than they really are” (381).” Though some idiots “have been taught to read, write, and account tolerably well,” they continue to lack self-confidence, “stamped with a distinct consciousness of [their] own great inferiority” (382). Such an individual

seems to shrink, and, as it were, to retire from your look and conversation, that, notwithstanding your apparent condescension, you cannot help considering him as immensely below you. Some idiots, perhaps the greater part, seem to be so chiefly or altogether, from a certain numbness or torpidity in the faculties of the understanding. But there are others in whom those faculties do not appear more torpid or benumbed than in many other people who are not accounted idiots. (382)

Smith implies that environmental as well as genetic factors play a role in determining the idiot’s low self-esteem, that the differences between himself and his benefactor inevitably separate him out from the larger populace within his own mind, presumably because even the educated or trained idiot retains that inextirpable sense of his own deficiency taught him by an inhospitable public.

John Locke, writing well before Adam Smith but with enough force to propel his ideas across the eighteenth century and well into the nineteenth, tackles the same socially disunifying

value systems in *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690). Some might suppose that Locke, preoccupied with epistemological questions concerning the nature and limits of human knowing, could be quickly claimed as a glorifier of intellect à la (the later) Francis Galton. Admittedly, Locke does argue for reason's crucial role in "assisting . . . all our other intellectual faculties," and he claims such mental powers as perception, abstraction, comparison, judgment, and contemplation to be that which separates us from animal life (567, 80, 104, 102, 97). He also believes that memory—another quality noticeably lacking in such Dickensian simpletons as Smike and Barnaby Rudge—is "of so great moment, that where it is wanting all the rest of our faculties are in a great measure useless" (99). Together, these descriptions of the mind's powers appear to leave little room

for those [idiots] who either perceive but dully, or retain the ideas that come into their minds but ill . . . who cannot distinguish, compare, and abstract, [and who] would hardly be able to understand and make use of language, or judge, or reason, to any tolerable degree; but only a little and imperfectly about things present and very familiar to their senses In fine, the defect in naturals seems to proceed from want of quickness, activity, and motion in the intellectual faculties, whereby they are deprived of reason (105-106)

A sense of finality in these last words suggests that those whose intellectual powers fall below a given threshold are in some manner "deprived of" reason itself—that very characteristic which he has so loudly declared *makes us human*. Even further beyond the pale of humanity proper are the creatures Locke calls "changelings," beings he considers as "something between a man and a beast," and who were undoubtedly disfigured idiots and imbeciles (488). Though he prefaces his remarks with a perfunctory reminder about the limits of his (and the rest of humanity's) ability to discern the exact relationship "a bountiful Father" maintains with each part of His creation, Locke concludes that such individuals' similarity in form to normal humans does not alone earn for them a soul and afterlife (488-89).

And yet, even as he seems to withhold with one hand full membership in the human race, Locke grants it with the other. If we attribute the philosopher's conclusions concerning "changelings" to period mythology, and move beyond his masterpiece's most-quoted conclusions about reason, we begin to discover one who very deliberately carved out a welcoming space for the intellectually disabled, often atypically formed, individual. Locke does this in part by questioning the importance society grants form and appearance. To his mind, "placing immortality in a certain superficial figure, turns out of doors all consideration of soul or spirit," as does *depriving* someone of their essential humanness because of their physical difference (489). In a passage on monsters that anticipates the central dilemma of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818, 1831), Locke sarcastically asks, "Shall a defect in the body make a monster . . . I would gladly know what are these precise lineaments which . . . are or are not capable of a rational soul to be joined to them? What sort of outside is the certain sign that there is or is not such an inhabitant within?" (489-90). At the same time, Locke offers up humanity's more generic, bipedal shape as a better "leading [if not distinctive] quality" of the human race than *reason*, a characteristic "which appears not at first, and in some never" (420). Locke directly questions the traditional glorification of reason as the quintessential human trait, a particularly radical and surprising departure given his larger argument's focus on this quality. He charges his readers to rethink their "sacred definition of *animal rationale*, and to substitute some other essence of the human species" as its most indispensable quality (367). His central argument that there "are no innate principles in the mind" hinges more than once on the assumption that reason-impaired idiots, like children, "have souls, have minds," an affirmation that allows him to ask why these supposedly native notions and "general maxims" that so many

claim to exist do not then make themselves perfectly visible in the ingenuous “natural” and unschooled child (13, 25, 18).

Locke refers frequently to changelings, monsters, idiots, and children as part of his ambitious attempt to define the boundaries and essential qualities of “man,” a being that he openly admits will escape *complete* analysis due to those very limits on human knowledge which he is trying to map. These limits prompt Locke’s recurring caveats (“I believe” and “my conjecture” are favorites) and encourage an ongoing process of self-evaluation that enriches even as it weakens the force of each declaration he makes. It becomes difficult, after all, to accept unthinkingly even the tightly-reasoned arguments of a man who continually pokes holes in humanity’s very powers of reason. Locke’s fundamentally *self-deprecating* stance also, however, wins a measure of credibility for early, bold claims like “thinking is the action, not essence of the soul” (159). Locke ends his project with similar deflations of the reasoning powers he has considered so closely. He reminds us that the academy’s high estimation of deductive syllogisms privileges a mechanical skill actually *unnecessary* for successful reasoning, then adds that our mind’s fallible power of inference often privileges “the sentiments it has once imbibed . . . and therefore makes too much haste before it perceives the connexion of the ideas that must hold the extremes together” (568, 570). In other words, reasoning is a various and unavoidably imperfect process, *regardless* of one’s mental musculature.

By complicating current models of mind, and by showing how undependable and compromised reason can be at the same time that he praises its achievements, Locke begins to blur those old distinctions between the slow and the erudite, the idiot and the sage. If we all begin with a cerebral blank slate regardless of our intellectual aptitude; if “sense or perception” (not abstract thought) are alone necessary for an “idea [to be] actually produced, and present in

the understanding”; and if not even the “most exalted wit or enlarged understanding” can create a new “simple idea,” the human population with all its differences suddenly begins to occupy a much more level playing field (92, 71). Under the Lockean pen, we appear more alike than we might wish to admit, a species more united by universal passions like desire and fear and an innate desire for happiness, than it is separated by varying degrees of any cognitive attribute.³³ Locke describes a shared mental and social space in which we *all* are liable to a kind of “madness” he calls “opposition to reason,” a space in which everyone tends to form strong opinions about matters they barely understand, relying on arbitrarily named, *nominal* essences to create crude categories by which they clumsily separate out and manipulate both ideas and people (315).³⁴ And this is the way it will always be. Finite minds will necessarily create finite, reductive categories: Locke just cautions us to remember the artificiality and inherent inadequacy of our abstract distinctions (365). Some very few, patient individuals (perhaps including himself) may actually succeed at delineating a handful of relatively coherent, useful features of human experience, but

Most men, wanting either time, inclination, or industry . . . [will] content themselves with some few obvious and outwards appearances of things, thereby readily to distinguish and sort them for the common affairs of life: and so, without farther examination, give them names, or take up the names already in use. (370)

This in itself would not be a problem, except that those terms “already in use”—terms which are in turn used in the division and “ranking of things under general names”—have “in all languages, received their birth and signification from ignorant and illiterate people” who “denominated things by those sensible qualities they found in them” (367). Of greater note here than Locke’s admitted slight of the uneducated is his point that human language systems and the hierarchical social orders to which they inevitably lead reflect a standing preoccupation with the

sighted object and its immediately tangible, measurable characteristics. We tend to grab hold of and deploy reductive labels, including those like “idiot” and “imbecile,” without considering much whether the term in hand accurately denotes more than a few material features of the object or person in question. Humanity does this both out of necessity—our childhood selves learning many words well “before the ideas are known for which they stand”—and out of generalized laziness: it is much easier to rely on the established simplifications of others than to work through every concept on our own (325). We all necessarily depend on this process of abstraction “whereby ideas taken from particular beings become general representatives of all the same kind,” but we forget rather too quickly that “words, in their primary or immediate signification stand for nothing but the ideas in the mind of him that uses them, how imperfectly soever or carelessly those ideas are collected from the things which they are supposed to represent” (324, 104, 323). However practical it may be to trade in arbitrarily assigned linguistic signifiers, each of which handily represents an endless number of signifieds, it behooves us to avoid setting our “thoughts more on words than things,” something particularly difficult to accomplish when one trades not only in words but in *metaphors* which “insinuate wrong ideas, move the passions, and thereby mislead the judgment; and so indeed are perfect cheats . . . however laudable or allowable oratory may render them in harangues and popular addresses” (325, 411). Locke suggests that figurative language’s spinning of already suspect words, while of limited use when providing “pleasure and delight” for an attentive audience, becomes far more troublesome when used to convey “dry truth and real knowledge,” a task difficult enough already due to humanity’s imperfect powers of reason (411).

An Imaginative Space: Creating Community for Cognitively Disabled Characters

Locke's concern with language's limitations raises an important question, whether or not the language dealers of the nineteenth (or any other) century would be fundamentally handicapped in the attempt to speak truth about their society's treatment of the intellectually disabled. Would not authors and poets—most of whom lacked medical, legal, and political expertise—be hampered further by the very tools of their trade, by that creative dependence on words and wordplay, on slippery signifiers and slipperier-still figurations and flourishes? Could writers like Mary Shelley and Robert Browning, both of whose imaginations were clearly stamped by John Locke's social and epistemological doctrine, manipulate an imperfect linguistic system skillfully enough to capture the idiosyncrasies of their imperfect culture? Could they accomplish even more—could some combination of close observation, extensive reading, limited personal experience, and skillful imagining birth a serviceable supplement to hands-on experience with the intellectually disabled? Was there something private artists could offer that society's public servants could not?

The groundbreaking early work of William Wordsworth, published during a promising burst of medical optimism in England, provides one affirmative response to these questions. The inaugural edition of Wordsworth's and Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Lyrical Ballads* (1798) tapped the decade's growing interest in and concern for the mentally ill and mentally disabled, appropriating so it could alter contemporary values and stereotypes. Wordsworth's obviously relevant "The Idiot Boy," for instance, occupies a decidedly transitional space between recent, romantic circumscriptions of the idiot as a hopelessly devolved but endlessly interesting objet d'art, and a new, post-enlightenment belief in *everyone's* educability and innate worth. Though unable to foresee John Connolly's successful application of Tuke's moral management principles

to the cognitively disabled population four decades later, Wordsworth's poem anticipates an intervening period that would succeed idealism with more tangible social and attitudinal improvements (if only for a time). In effect, Wordsworth helps pave the way for such change by introducing his readers to a radical vision of inclusive, interdependent community.

The most obvious evidence of Wordsworth's enlightened perspective lies in the lightly satiric tone he uses to lampoon old, stereotypical figurations of the idiot. In his poem, prefaced fondly with a note claiming he had "never [written] anything with so much glee," Wordsworth includes a number of conventional motifs and dramatic scenarios only to playfully disrupt them. Faced with the sudden illness of her neighbor, Betty Foy sets her idiot son on their horse and sends him off on a hurried, midnight quest to retrieve the town doctor. Wordsworth depicts young Johnny Foy with predictably romantic strokes, sketching the portrait of a *natural* at one with his surroundings, carrying a holly brand for a riding crop, accompanying the hooting owls with his own inarticulate burring noises, and sitting as "still and mute" as the moon that lights his steed's way (ll. 57-61, 113-15, 90-91). An unlikely, incapable hero, if ever there were one, and yet Wordsworth foresees and successfully undercuts both incredulous and sentimental reader responses. He does this, not by having poor Johnny stumble into a dangerous situation from which his dear mother must extricate him, nor by having the idiot successfully navigate his surroundings, deliver the message, and save the day. Instead, Wordsworth rewrites the very terms of dramatic expectation, undercutting that traditional notion of heroism and anticipation of a narrative climax which together help set the poem in motion, and in the process transforming the merely sentimental into the highly realistic. Across four consecutive stanzas, the poet light-heartedly deflates the audience's melodramatic expectation(s) that half-witted Johnny will fall off a cliff attempting to snatch a star from the sky; take off chasing sheep and end up in a distant

desert; gallop swiftly along the thoroughfares scaring passers-by as if he were “the very soul of evil;” or perhaps just travel mysteriously along the vale like a “silent horseman-ghost” (ll. 327-46). Nor does Johnny accomplish the important task assigned him, instead allowing his horse to amble into a nice little grazing area next to a thundering waterfall, there to be found hours later by his distracted mother. The moment when Betty discovers her son intact becomes the poem’s unexpected, anticlimactic climax, a twist Wordsworth enables by shifting attention away from a deathly ill Susan Gale—whom he abruptly heals—towards the temporarily separated mother and son.

Wordsworth circumvents our narrative expectations by deftly transforming a common, rural community into a magical realistic world where community, interdependence, and emotion trump the more suspect virtues of self-reliance and intellect. The town doctor, with his singular education and vast experience, serves no heroic purpose in *this* small-town drama; his unwillingness to help the distressed mother search for Johnny, along with rather “grim” expectations concerning the idiot’s fate (l. 269), neatly remove him and his medical know-how from the poet’s new narrative equation. Later, in what any doctor past or present would dismiss as medical malarkey, we are told that the old woman near death in the poem’s opening suddenly recovers, not by resting, but *by worrying*. The narrator explains that those “dreadful fears” which begin plaguing her when Johnny failed to return had a medicinal effect, curing her so suddenly and completely that she was able to rise from bed and take off in pursuit of her missing friends.³⁵ Within the confines of the fantastic realm Wordsworth has fashioned, this highly improbable event fits perfectly. The narrative magically rewards Susan Gale’s concern for her fellows with renewed health in the same way that Betty Foy’s original, unhesitant willingness to risk her only child to help a neighbor actually insures his well-being during the long hours that

follow. For an idiot like Johnny *is* in danger on his own, make no mistake; however much Wordsworth stretches plausibility elsewhere, exaggeration plays no part in his articulation of the boy's disability. Johnny is an idiot in more than name, keeper of a mind neither the narrator nor his own mother can fully penetrate.³⁶ The way his joy at riding solo quickly overwhelms any memory of his mother's detailed and reiterated instructions—combined with his rudimentary language, his unflappable mood, and his famous mistaking of owls for cocks and the moon for the sun (which upsets the clichéd notion of a “natural” fully attuned with nature)—convinces us that his is a condition which clearly merits Betty Foy's growing distress. Wordsworth's close elaboration of Johnny's disability also clarifies the real act of surrender involved in sending “Him whom she loves” (l. 376) off on his own, and explains the emotional rollercoaster Mrs. Foy rides in her son's absence. The small measure of unease visible when she pats his transportation goodbye at eight o'clock reappears as ten and then eleven o'clock pass. Before she finally locates Johnny and the pony around five the next morning, Betty's anxiety has turned into fear and then desperation. She alternately wonders whether he has drowned, gotten lost, been injured while wandering through a dangerously derelict castle, or perhaps joined a gypsy troop—none of which plausible scenarios carry the melodramatic tint of those unlikely events mocked earlier by the narrator. Nor does Wordsworth simplify or otherwise make straight the wild course of her emotions: one moment she doubts of Johnny's safety, the next she casts “an endless string” of aspersions at him for delaying so long, and, later, she guiltily considers suicide as an appropriate consequence for her negligence (l. 170). However whimsical his mood when writing this poem, Wordsworth clearly worked hard to achieve a high degree of emotional and psychological verisimilitude.

“The Idiot Boy” memorializes a profound sort of interdependence, creating a simply sketched but richly colored vision of community where family and neighbor work closely together, their “life and soul . . . buried” deeply in one another’s fate (ll. 140-41). The reward for these individuals’ mutual altruism is neither greater economic productivity (they all lose a night’s sleep) nor some useful scientific discovery (globetrotting Johnny develops no new method of nighttime navigation). The narrative also fails to reassert old performance-based formulae or social boundaries during the crisis’s aftermath. Johnny does not receive punishment but praise for his ineffective turn at adventuring; his mother weighs the happy outcome which concludes the journey more heavily than the failure to achieve that journey’s initial purpose. Johnny is safe, and that is enough. ““Oh! Johnny, never mind the Doctor; / ‘You’ve done your best, and that is all.’” (ll. 407-8). This community has not abandoned the boy to his fate, nor responded with domestic or institutional confinement upon his recovery. Instead, they have embraced the responsibility imposed by Johnny’s difficult limitations. Family boundaries have blurred—an old neighbor being treated throughout as blood kin—and no dividing, intellectual hierarchy has been forcibly inscribed. The preservation of life itself and the coming together of (temporarily) separated loved ones provides the central stuff of this narrative. The critics who, in Wordsworth’s time and our own, dismiss the poem as sentimental pap likely do so because unable or unwilling to recognize the poet’s radical realignment of the social matrix. The poem does more than “replace that exclusionary indifference and aggressivity of contemporary views on idiots with those based on sympathy and love” and “parody that mythologizing of the idiot which had become an empiricist commonplace,” though it does do both.³⁷ If we follow Avital Ronell’s example in linking this poem directly back to Wordsworth’s earlier *The Somersetshire Tragedy*, an unpublished (and later, destroyed) narrative poem about an intellectually disabled

woman who is abused, raped, and ultimately killed by her lover, then “The Idiot Boy” also becomes a direct response to contemporary injustices, a recommendation of sorts that its readers adjust their own posture towards this oft-maligned and shunned population.

The nineteenth century would offer many different points along the curve of progress and regress onto which writers could plot their own opinions, and not all would join Wordsworth in pursuing imaginative, progressive engagement with the mentally disabled. In the same way that Wordsworth’s enlightened perspective rode a swell of post-Enlightenment optimism at the turn of the century—helping to herald those socio-medical innovations that would briefly blossom in the 40s and 50s—there would be other, equally sagacious writers who adopted the predominant prejudices of a later and less idealistic period. George Eliot’s 1864 short story “Brother Jacob,” for instance, satirizes not only the greedy and aptly named David Faux, but the idiotic brother Jacob (an animal-like, intellectually disabled sibling whom his entire family considers primarily as a “trouble and expense”) whose amusing gullibility David fails to turn to his own purposes.³⁸ Eliot, that is, employs Jacob solely as an uncomplicated plot device and character foil, flattening his person in the same way eugenics would flatten the idiot and imbecile. In contrast to Eliot and the dominant view, at least a handful of writers would buck contemporary trends, either directly or indirectly suing for idiot rights regardless of what current opinion might recommend. For some, adopting an enlightened stance would mean carving out more inviting spaces in their stories for intellectually disabled characters, providing the idiot more nuanced roles than merely plot catalyst or moral yardstick, and creating for the imbecile a welcoming family or interdependent community. Other writers would promote social equality for the cognitively disadvantaged more obliquely. Some would critique the scientific and intellectualist ideologies that promoted ostracization of the intellectually different, while others explored the ramifications

of a Victorian family's choosing domestic over institutional care for the disordered mind in their midst.

The following chapters examine a selection of canonical writers who employed one or another of these strategies—novelists and poets who in some way moved contrary to their respective periods' prevailing attitudes towards intellectual difference, and who in some way tackled a question few were even bothering to articulate: *where does the idiot belong?*

This first chapter has provided the project's excursion into what I will call "The Idiot Question" with a brief historical context. It has considered ways in which individuals with cognitive disabilities provided the people of an increasingly powerful nation with a useful ideological yardstick against which to measure their industrial and social progress. The chapter has also reviewed some of the nineteenth-century laws and medical institutions that, inadvertently or not, ended up making segregation more plausible and systemic prejudice inevitable.

Chapter two will look at the novels and short fiction of Mary Shelley, whose thematic concerns and habits of characterization were shaped by her famous parents, William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft. The chapter pays particular attention to Shelley's physiognomic inheritance, and the way she redirects and critiques this strong face-reading impulse when creating characters whose physical and intellectual features resemble those which routinely earn her peers' abuse in the real world. Not content with the mere deconstructions of facile face-reading, Shelley moves a step further and, in *Frankenstein* (1818; 1831) and *The Last Man* (1826), constructs relational spaces where cooperative, intimate ties can form between cognitively disabled, disfigured, physically impaired, and able-bodied individuals.

Chapter three explores the work of Charles Dickens, an author widely recognized for his sentimental and comic renderings of intellectual disability. This chapter traces a chronological path through Dickens's novels, arguing that the famous novelist gradually moves from traditional caricatures towards more nuanced characterization of the mentally disabled, his increasingly empowering portraits suggesting a writer ever more attuned to the prejudices stacked against this population. In Dickens's early novels, "imbeciles" like Smike and Barnaby slip easily into the stereotypic garments laid out by convention, playing rhetorical roles that disqualify them from full participation in their respective communities. Later characters like Mr. Dick and—to a greater degree—Maggy and Sloppy largely avoid such typecasting. Though the cognitively disabled characters in this second generation play more peripheral roles in their respective plots than did the first generation, they actually become far more integral parts of the families and communities they live alongside.

Chapter four takes a New Critical approach to Robert Browning's entire oeuvre, including in its sweep a number of late poems neglected by modern critics. Though Browning never ceased experimenting with voice and perspective, he did prove rather consistent thematically. A number of cultural critiques directly relevant to the status of idiots and imbeciles in Victorian England wind themselves through his body of work, though Browning's narrators only rarely speak of idiots *per se*. Browning's shooting gallery sports a wide variety of targets, including society's privileging of cold reason over emotional expression, its divisive and unfortunately instinctive reliance on Galtonesque systems of measuring intellect, and a chronic distrust of language itself that the introspective Browning shares with many another literary genius. This linguistic apprehension inflects the manner in which he negotiates the use of words like "idiot," "simpleton," "imbecile," and "fool." The narrators of his dramatic monologues who

use such words to criticize others' intelligence usually prove themselves suspect, even villainous; those who employ these terms to describe others' moral behavior, or who instead use such labels self-reflexively, often turn out to be wiser, more discriminating judges of character.

Chapter five enters both the household and novels of the Brontë sisters to consider how fictional configurations of mental illness and mental disability were influenced by the girls' experience with the disturbed, drug-addled state of their idolized brother Branwell. The choice by their father to care for the troubled youth at home instead of turning him over to professionals for treatment moved contrary to the culture's growing tendency to institutionalize bothersome family members, providing the girls with valuable—if uncomfortably long—years of experience. Though Branwell was neither intellectually disabled nor (in the strictest sense) mentally ill, the maturing authors who lived with him during his long bouts of illness learned first-hand about that odd mixture of affection and repulsion which often accompanies domestic, personal care of a disordered mind. This experience would inform Anne's construction of the dissolute drunkard Arthur Huntingdon in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1847), Charlotte's renderings of the mentally ill Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre* (1847) and the cretin Marie Broc in *Villette* (1853), and Emily's more subtle evocation of idiocy as one of the many dangerous specters haunting the moors in *Wuthering Heights* (1847).

Chapter six closes this study by briefly considering how modern academics might glean some practical instruction from both Victorian and modern fiction. If we, as Garland-Thomson recommends, “accept the convention that fiction has some mimetic relation to life” and “grant it power to further shape our perceptions of the world,” then perhaps the humanities can learn something from our great works of literature about promoting intellectual diversity both theoretically and practically.³⁹

Notes

¹ Frances Power Cobbe, “Criminals, Idiots, Women, and Minors,” *Frasers Magazine* (December 1868) in *Criminals, Idiots, Women and Minors: Victorian Writing by Women on Women*, ed. Susan Hamilton (Ontario: Broadview Press, 1995) 110.

² Rosemary Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (New York: Columbia UP, 1997) 19-23.

³ See chapter six for a brief discussion of how those with intellectual disabilities might actually be invited into professional discourse and academic exercises such as conferences.

⁴ In 1878, Daniel Hack Tuke wrote, “the rich and poor, from different causes, labour under a large amount of preventable lunacy; that beer and gin, malnutrition, a dreary monotony of toil, muscular exhaustion, domestic distress, misery and anxiety, account largely, not only for the number of poor who become insane in adult life, but whom from hereditary predisposition are born weak-minded or actually idiotic; that among the middle classes, stress of business, excessive competition, failures, and also, in many cases, reckless and intemperate living, occasion the attacks; while in the upper classes, intemperance still works woe . . . while multiplicity of subjects of study in youth, and excessive brain work in after life, exert a certain amount of injurious influence, underwork, luxurious habits, undisciplined wills, desultory life, produce a crop of nervous disorders, terminating not infrequently in insanity.” See Daniel Hack Tuke (1878), p.124 of an unnamed original text, in *Madness and Morals: Ideas on Insanity in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Vieda Skultans (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975) 3.

⁵ John Barlow, *Man’s Power over Himself to Prevent or Control Insanity*, 1849, “The Sensational Use of Medicine,” *The Victorian Web*, 2 Sept. 2005, <<http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/collins/senmedicine.html>>.

⁶ Vieda Skultans, *Madness and Morals*, 15-16, 2.

⁷ This idea recurs throughout Baumer’s text. See Franklin L. Baumer, *Modern European Thought: Continuity and Change in Ideas, 1600-1950* (New York: Macmillan, 1977).

⁸ Wilkie Collins, *Poor Miss Finch* (1872; New York: Oxford UP, 2000) 102.

⁹ David Wright, *Mental Disability in Victorian England: The Earlswood Asylum 1847-1901* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001) 65.

¹⁰ In the first edition of Godwin’s *Political Justice* (1793), he made the infamously utilitarian claim that his innate sense of justice should lead him (and any other *just* individual) to rescue Fénélon, the Archbishop of Cambray, from a burning building before rescuing Fénélon’s uneducated chambermaid, even “[s]upposing the chambermaid had been my wife, my mother or my benefactor.” William Godwin, *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1793, 1795, 1798),

Political and Philosophical Writings of William Godwin, Vol. 3. Ed. Mark Philp (London: William Pickering, 1993) 50.

¹¹ David Wright, *Mental Disability*, 181.

¹² British racism had obviously survived the country's abolition of colonial slavery in 1833 and their hosting of a World Antislavery Convention in 1840.

¹³ Francis Galton, *Hereditary Genius* (1869; Honolulu: UP of the Pacific, 2001) 47, 80, 66.

¹⁴ David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000) 65. Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (1961; New York: Vintage, 1988) 157.

¹⁵ Galton, 45-46.

¹⁶ Galton, 35-36.

¹⁷ Jonathan Andrews, Asa Briggs, Roy Porter, Penny Tucker, and Keir Waddington, *The History of Bethlem* (London: Routledge, 1997) 95-97, 100.

¹⁸ Anthony Masters, *Bedlam* (London: Michael Joseph, 1977) 58. Mark Finnane, *Insanity and the Insane in Post-Famine Ireland* (London: Croom Helm, 1981) 16.

¹⁹ Joseph Robins, *Fools and Mad: A History of the Insane in Ireland* (Dublin: Institute of Public Administration, 1986) 61. David Wright, *Mental Disability*, 47, 12, 37.

²⁰ Alexander Morison, *Outlines of Mental Diseases* (1824), in *Madness and Morals*, ed. Skultans, 242.

²¹ Morison, in *Madness and Morals*, ed. Skultans, 241-42.

²² George Man Burrows, *Commentaries on Insanity* (1828), in *Madness and Morals*, ed. Skultans, 245.

²³ James Cowles Prichard, *On the Different Forms of Insanity in Relation to Jurisprudence* (1847), in *Madness and Morals*, ed. Skultans, 246-48.

²⁴ Wright, 16-18, 37-38.

²⁵ Wright, 48.

²⁶ Martin Halliwell notes that while “the term ‘subnormal’ (‘severely subnormal’ for idiots) continued to imply that mental defectives constituted a special subgroup, the new Act was committed to social integration . . . the National Association for Mental Health (Mind) attempted to replace the terms ‘deficiency’ and ‘subnormality’ with ‘mental handicap.’ Instead of the category of idiot, ‘profound mental handicap’ was proposed as an alternative. This shift in definition is vital for transferring emphasis away from a sense of incompleteness and lack, to a social condition that only partially hampers a fully active life . . . the almost freakish categories of 1913 were replaced by gradations of handicap, based not only on IQ but also on other psychological and social factors that emphasized a sense of human continuity instead of radical difference” (12). See Martin Halliwell, *Images of Idiocy: The Idiot Figure in Modern Fiction and Film* (Cornwall: Ashgate, 2004) 12.

²⁷ Andrews et al., 270, 327.

²⁸ “Cretins and Idiots: What Has Been and What Can be Done for Them,” *The Atlantic Monthly, A Magazine of Literature, Art, and Politics*, Vol. I – February, 1858, No. IV, *The Gutenberg Project*. 3 Aug. 2005. <<http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/1/2/3/1/12319/12319-8.txt>>.

²⁹ David Wright, *Mental Disability*, 169, 27.

³⁰ Foucault argues, for instance, that the move to incarcerate and institutionalize the insane was propelled largely by a growing fear that mental illness was a contagion, a fear “formulated in medical terms but animated, basically, by a moral myth” held by the masses (202). Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*. Trans. Richard Howard (1961; New York: Vintage, 1988) 202.

³¹ Wright, *Mental Disability*, 49-60. Wright notes that though indigenous, “wandering” idiots undoubtedly existed across the country, their number has been greatly exaggerated by historians, perhaps “as a rhetorical foil against which to show the incarceration of the insane in purpose-built institutions, rather than as an accurate description of the liberty experienced by the mentally disabled in Victorian England. Testimony from the [Certificates of Insanity under consideration] illustrates that many relatives saw the household as a place of confinement from which the child was not supposed to escape” (57).

³² John Langdon Down, “Observations on an Ethnic Classification of Idiots,” *Journal of Medical Science* 13 (1867) 122.

³³ Locke, 162, 187.

³⁴ “It is necessary for me to be as I am: God and nature has made me so: but there is nothing I have is essential to me [sic]. An accident or disease may very much alter my colour or shape; a fever or fall may take away my reason or memory, or both; and apoplexy leave neither sense nor understanding, no, nor life. Other creatures of my shape may be made with more and better, or fewer and worse, faculties than I have: and others may have reason and sense in a shape and body very different from mine. None of these are essential to the one or the other, or

to any individual whatsoever, till the mind refers it to some sort or species of things; and then presently, according to the abstract idea of that sort, something is found essential. Let any one examine his own thoughts, and he will find, that as soon as he supposes or speaks of essential, the consideration of some species, or the complex idea, signified by some general name, comes into his mind: and it is in reference to that, that this or that quality is said to be essential. So that if it be asked, whether it is essential to me, or any other particular corporeal being to have reason? I say, No; no more than it is essential to this white thing I write on to have words in it. But if that particular being be to be counted of the sort ‘man,’ and to have the name ‘man’ given it, then reason is essential to it, supposing reason to be a part of the complex idea the name ‘man’ stands for: as it essential to this thing I write on to contain words, if I will give it the name ‘treatise,’ and rank it under that species. So that ‘essential’ and ‘not essential’ relate only to our abstract ideas, and the names annexed to them; which amounts to no more but this, that whatever particular thing has not in it those qualities which are contained in the abstract idea which any general term stands for, cannot be ranked under that species, nor be called by that name, since that abstract idea is the very essence of that species” (357).

³⁵ “Long Susan lay deep lost in thought, / And many dreadful fears beset her, / Both for her messenger and nurse; / And as her mind grew worse and worse, / Her body it grew better.” (ll. 422-26). William Wordsworth, “The Idiot Boy,” 1878, *Lyrical Ballads and Other Poems 1797-1800*, eds. James Butler and Karen Green (London: Cornell UP, 1992).

³⁶ “And Johnny burrs and laughs aloud, / Whether in cunning or in joy, / I cannot tell . . .” (ll. 387-89). Also, Betty misreads the “silence of her idiot boy” as his pony walks away, taking his taciturnity for steadfastness instead of paralyzing happiness that has already erased any recollection of her instructions (ll. 102-103).

³⁷ Alan Bewell, *Wordsworth and the Enlightenment* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1989) 56.

³⁸ George Eliot, “Brother Jacob,” 1864, *The Lifted Veil and Brother Jacob*, ed. Sally Shuttleworth (London: Penguin, 2001) 81.

³⁹ Garland-Thomson, 10.

Chapter Two

Reading Between the Lines:

Intimations of the Idiot in Mary Shelley's Oeuvre and Milieu

There were only four passengers besides ourselves, three of these were students of the Strasburgh university: Schwitz, a rather handsome, good tempered young man; Hoff, a kind of shapeless animal, with a heavy, ugly, German face; and Schneider, who was nearly an idiot [sic], and on whom his companions were always playing a thousand tricks. (*Six Weeks* ' 35)

In what became her *History of a Six Week's Tour* (1817), a young and animated Mary Shelley records many critical snapshots of the strangers she runs into during her first jaunt across the continent. These observations of passing strangers are brief by nature: limited exposure yields limited data. But in what proves a rather characteristic maneuver for her, Mary Shelley draws on superficial evidence as she moves quickly towards judgment.¹ Following a pattern offered by her mother's *Letters Written during a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* (1796), she passes beyond describing mere surfaces to positing character, drawing conclusions from face and form as often as she describes behavior or carriage. The equation appears relatively simple, at least as concerns the first two individuals described above. Good looks win those like Schwitz quick praise for their presumably amiable and virtuous dispositions, while ugliness, slovenliness, or deformity earns those similar to Hoff decidedly negative appellations such as "animal." The acts of face-reading implicit in these judgments place Mary Shelley among the many adherents of Johann Caspar Lavater (1741-1801), a Swiss pastor whose physiognomic observations entertained England for nearly a century following their translation

into English in the early 1800s. Though enormously popular across Europe, Lavater's ideas also evoked vehement detractors, both on the continent and in England.² As detailed in Christopher Rivers' *Face Value* (1994), the resulting tension merely reflected pre-existing fault lines in social opinion, cracks already evident in the works of such earlier physiognomic enthusiasts as Pierre Marivaux.³

In some cases, such fault lines opened up within the oeuvre of a single author. The writings of both Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin move back and forth between overtly challenging and implicitly adopting physiognomic and pathognomic assumptions, as does the fiction of their daughter. Their own conflicted approach, that is, appears to have shaped Mary Shelley's similarly inconsistent posture towards the issue of face-reading.⁴ While transparently physiognomic gestures permeate Mary Shelley's personal writing and prove a staple in her fiction, her use of such facile judgments when she encounters intellectually disabled and deformed figures proves more complicated.⁵ The chapter epigraph drawn from one of her earliest writings seems to place her in Lavater's camp, her assessment of the gullible Schneider apparently aligning her clearly with the prejudiced physiognomist. Quickly captured and categorized by Shelley, this young man appears slow and may well be developmentally delayed, despite his apparent designation as student. Whether he is what those in his period would term an "idiot" or not, and whether Shelley grounds her youthful judgment of him in physical oddities as well as behavioral indices (her identification of him as an idiot *prior* to her mentioning his gullibility at least allows for this option), Shelley's use of the word "ideot" successfully conjures yet another cultural tension from her era. This related issue, the question of what attitude one could with propriety adopt towards the intellectually disabled (often "disfigured") individual, had already briefly polarized some of her contemporaries. William Wordsworth's compassionate

depiction of the subject in his poem "The Idiot Boy" (1798), a treatment which foregrounded an intellectually disabled boy's innocence instead of any gross behavior or physical deformity, evoked a series of negative responses. While some appreciated Wordsworth's attempt here and elsewhere to "indict prevailing harsh and unsympathetic reactions to idiocy," others like Robert Southey and John Wilson criticized the poem's sentimental romanticization of the idiot and questioned the mother's love for her son—Wilson seriously doubted that any mother could feel such warmth for such a child.⁶

Taken in isolation, the opening excerpt from Shelley's journal suggests a hostile posture towards the intellectually deficient—a population whose issues Mary Shelley never engages as directly as do some of her peers. Her engagement elsewhere with the related issues of physiognomy and reduced mental functioning, however, paints a different picture, one of a popular author subtly advocating for such individuals. Since she wrote no clearly articulated manifesto, placing her stance properly in its historical context requires the close consideration of scattered clues. In *Mary Shelley: Romance and Reality* (1989), Emily Sunstein suggests that understanding the author's position on some issues requires reading between the lines: "In her journal and many of her letters, except to [Percy] Shelley, one has to tease out not what she thinks but what she feels or prefers not to say; one begins to know her in her silences and in her works" (111). Defining Mary Shelley's posture towards the intellectually disabled requires just this kind of inquiry, a careful consideration of such related issues as the physiognomic practice that characterized her era, the works by her parents which she so eagerly embraced in her youth, her heavy investment in visual tropes and gestures, and her configurations of vision impairment and physical difference—all of which inform both the direct incarnations and more oblique intimations of the idiot figure threaded throughout her oeuvre. Did one who strongly believed

that God valued beauty above all else, and who herself engaged in frequent and enthusiastic physiognomic judgments, somehow learn to temper these inclinations when rendering characters whose mental limitations were compounded by physical difference?⁷

Useful Landmarks in the Path to a New Paradigm: Puccinelli, Halliwell, and Blatt

A few recent voices provide useful markers around which to steer this investigation. In *Yardsticks* (1995), a study of the functions played by “retarded” characters in modern American narratives, Patricia Puccinelli delineates five possible roles for the intellectually disabled figure: “yardstick,” wise fool, catalyst, “window pane,” and accessory. While admitting the variability of the idiot’s function in literature, however, she limits the significance of such characters to just that—their prescribed purpose as literary conventions. Puccinelli chooses not to present such characters and situations as anything more than functional stereotypes: while admitting that such characters may be modeled after real individuals, she maintains that literary figures are definable “as patterns used for thematic effect in a way that human beings are never used” (4). Her position denies the kind of mutually informative relationship between fiction and reality assumed by this project. Whether described on the page of a nineteenth-century novel or observed in a bus on the local transit line, intellectually disabled individuals tend to operate as sites where a society’s competing paradigms and prejudices materialize. These paradigms are then either accepted, modified, or challenged by the author or real-world spectator—a dynamic process which can also prove transformative for the secondary observer (the reader or bystander). Puccinelli also sets aside other physically abnormal “freaks” in literature as irrelevant to her project (2-3), disregarding that experience of being evaluated and categorized which the intellectually disabled hold in common with the physically disabled or disfigured.

This chapter will, by contrast, highlight correspondences among the experiences of vision-impaired characters, those with differently proportioned limbs and heads, and those few who sport discolorations or other abnormalities in their skin or eyes. Defining Mary Shelley's engagement with the intellectually disabled figure requires just this kind of associative maneuvering, and a bit of conjecture. Such a program recognizes that such individuals are not only variously treated, but variously configured in fiction, and that features stereotypically assigned to the idiot—such as abnormally prominent or vacant eyes and oddly sized heads (Andrews 184, 193)—often appear alongside reduced cognitive capacity in the dwarf, the monster, and the deformed villain.

Martin Halliwell's recent *Images of Idiocy: The Idiot Figure in Modern Fiction and Film* (2004) shares with Puccinelli's study this preoccupation with the idiot as fictional *figure*. Halliwell's survey of literature's rhetorical uses of the idiot across the last two centuries highlights the inevitable conceptual overlap among the various clinical, religious, legal, and literary domains that employ the term "idiot," and uses the resulting confusion as an impetus to blur such distinctions further and approach idiocy as less a "specific 'condition'" than a "flexible symbolic device," "an overdetermined concept with multiple and complex causes" (1-2). Halliwell foregrounds *idiocy's* role as a "social *idea* with particular purposes and functions" (3, my emphasis). While providing a very thorough history of related medical treatment, legal categorization, and linguistic play over the last two centuries, Halliwell's project largely sets aside the concerns of real individuals with intellectual disabilities; his treatment routinely subsumes those with actual neurological impairments into the larger, more ambiguously defined set of *anyone* society chooses to treat or label as intellectually "other."⁸ Halliwell does move a step beyond Puccinelli when he suggests that an exploration of idiocy's "symbolic potential" will

reveal how the idiot figure “has been used widely to explore a range of personality traits that cannot be adequately portrayed by means of habitual modes of human behaviour” (6, 2). He does intimate, that is, that an examination of the idiot figure in literature and film can have real-world applications. Unfortunately, he does not elaborate on such applications, and instead devotes his time to delineating the many ways in which the liminal, multivalent idiot defies categorization.

In his final work, *The Conquest of Mental Retardation* (1987), the late Burton Blatt appears highly aware of both traditional literary conventions and Mary Shelley’s deviation from such norms. While the eminent psychologist and activist for the intellectually disabled would likely have placed Shelley’s work alongside that body of fictional, narrative literature which some claim “perpetuated the physiognomic tradition” in the decades following Lavater (Rivers 102), he would undoubtedly have added the important caveat that Shelley deviates markedly from society’s well-worn physiognomic path when she turns her attention to the intellectually disabled figure.⁹ While Blatt admits that Shelley joins all of us in being “victimized by the surface nature of human comprehensibility,” he claims that her work turns a corner when rendering those with physical deformities, that the novelist clearly instructs the reader to avoid attributing monstrous character to someone abnormal in appearance (304). In an attempt to plant firmly his argument concerning the psychological effects of figurative and literal banishment on those with mental retardation, Blatt alludes to *Frankenstein; or The Modern Prometheus* (1818, 1831), that increasingly fashionable artifact of early nineteenth-century Gothic fiction and modern film:

Mary Shelley's (1831/1965) classic story of Dr. Frankenstein and the monster he created tells a much misunderstood tale. It is the story of a man banished from society, a man whose loneliness caused him to become a monster . . . the story has been told and retold . . . The retold

stories bear little resemblance to Shelley's. In the newer versions, the point is not that people can be made into monsters if they are banished from society Rather There are ugly creatures in the world . . . they must be discovered and routed out of decent society; they must be put away forever, or, better, killed. (304)

In separating the original tale from its subsequent permutations, Blatt distinguishes between two different stock reactions to the monster in our midst. To Mary Shelley he assigns what I will call an *attributive* paradigm, a method of narrative-making that dissects and displays for public consideration that troublesome process of “stigmatization” identified by Rosemary Garland-Thomson and others.¹⁰ This attributive approach reveals how a monstrous identity, consonant or not with an individual's true behavior, often *originates* with the prejudiced society or person who equates physical deformity with deformity of character and, subsequently, attempts to inscribe a deviant disposition on the abnormally shaped subject. Such sociological dissection as Shelley's is didactic in principle, seeking to reproduce and then visibly dismantle the easy formulae which link physicality with personality. In Blatt's words, "Shelley tried to teach her readers that monsters are made, but that the 'disease' can be prevented" (304). Blatt assigns to the authors and directors of later stage and cinematic incarnations of the Frankenstein story what might be called a more *genitive* mode of representation, one that assumes deformity of appearance must connote deformity of character—a self-reflexive, self-sustaining model consistent with egregiously simplistic physiognomic principles. Keeping these paradigms in mind as we approach the work of Mary Shelley and that of her parents will assist us in evaluating their relative stances on the relationship between the deformed, sometimes intellectually disabled, individual's exterior, and his moral interior. These two tools will also illuminate the way in which Mary Shelley moves beyond the inconsistent practice of her parents to create a

more inclusive (if equally imaginative) social space where the disabled, the able-bodied, and the able-minded can coexist.

Mary Shelley's Inheritance: Customizing a Slippery Physiognomic Practice

Mary Shelley came of age in a culture enthralled with acts of reading: reading texts, reading Nature's landscapes, and—unfortunately for those with abnormal features—reading character in the contours of another's countenance. In addition to feeding the period's hunger for novels and quarterly magazines, Shelley participated in the categorizing practice which led her contemporaries to “read” every landscape as sublime, beautiful, or picturesque. Edmund Burke's popular *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1756) had helped codify this growing fascination, grounding the appraisal of objects, vistas, and *one's fellows* in an instinctive desire for self-preservation and community. Oddly enough, Burke emphasized humanity's desire for close companionship in a way that excluded certain kinds of people: by arguing that community was formed by a universally *sensuous* experience of the world, he implicitly disregarded the sensually impaired, just as his high valuation of imagination implicitly sidelined the intellectually disabled.¹¹ Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgment* (1790), an influential work which bolstered Burke's general conclusions, also proved problematic for the differently abled. Kant's own explanation of how the sublime induces terror in the viewer methodically divorced the perceived object from the apprehending mind. He asserted that recognition of the sublime constituted, not a pathetic response reliably experienced by everyone (as with Burke), but an experience rooted in the individual mind—minds turned by inherent, complex notions of morality more than simple, shared emotive

incidents. In other words, the apprehending mind was assumed to receive direction from an individual's *common sense*, a faculty Kant (provocatively) assumed to be held by all.

Theories of aesthetic apprehension, that is, inevitably shaped cultural ideas about people as well as panoramas. The able-minded middle and upper classes in the early nineteenth century eagerly pursued what became a widespread, multi-faceted preoccupation with “reading” the seen image. Evidence of such a pastime lies everywhere in the written records of Mary Shelley and her mother; each noted with precision her emotional responses to an array of environmental stimuli encountered during her respective continental travels. These two women also constituted part of the growing number of amateur physiognomists and phrenologists who turned their assessing gaze from the face of Nature to that of their neighbors. Such enthusiasts followed the lead of celebrities like Lavater and the up-and-coming Dr. Gall, whose skull-tracing phrenological system Mary Shelley likely read about in 1815 while flipping through the *Quarterly Review*, one of her favorite journals.¹² Divining individual character by referencing a certain arrangement of facial features and cranial moldings would continue to be a favorite diversion for the dinner party throughout the Victorian period. Though most did not presume to delineate a closed system by which one's character might be reliably read from her face—therein adopting Lavater's own vague, non-committal example—such reserve did not impede the many who rushed to assert their own readings of personalities and proclivities after only a glance at a subject's profile.¹³

The widespread physiognomic theorizing and play fashionable at the turn of the century aroused inconsistent opposition in the works of Shelley's parents, Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin. On the one hand, their fiction and personal writings reveal a deep-seated discomfort with society's tendency to rely on first impressions. As Jacobin activists, the two

writers try repeatedly to break through the glittering surface of government pomp and rhetoric so as to unearth the widespread inequities plaguing contemporary France and England. Their vocal distrust of political facades moves in step with a similar suspicion of personal manner, facial features, and the individuals who would extrapolate *character* from such malleable signifiers. In practice, however, Wollstonecraft and Godwin only inconsistently follow those precepts they so vehemently tout.

A Vindication of the Rights of Woman (1792) follows the lead of Wollstonecraft's earlier *Original Stories from Real Life* (1788) in criticizing females whose anxious maintenance of their physical beauty provides the cornerstone of their identity (61-62, 141-42), as well as reprimanding men like Rousseau who encourage such folly (87-88). To Wollstonecraft, feminine allure unaccompanied by life-giving imagination or *moral* beauty reduces male passion to lustful appetite and swallows up a woman's proper social responsibilities in narcissistic practice (111, 149-50, 171-73). Wollstonecraft wants to observe the world "stripped of all its false delusive charms," to see "each object in its true point of view" (110). Implying a rejection of those facile face-reading gestures which deduce one's nature from one's appearance, she suggests an alternative form of physiognomy in which character and malleable facial features shape and reflect one another in a mutual reciprocity:

To render the person perfect, physical and moral beauty ought to be attained at the same time . . . Judgment must reside on the brow, affection and fancy beam in the eye, and humanity curve the cheek, or vain is the sparkling of the finest eye or the elegantly turned finish of the fairest features . . . this fair assemblage . . . is the reward of exertions calculated to support each other . . . (171-72)

The contents of her *Letters Written during a Short Residence in Denmark, Norway and Sweden* (1796) complicate matters somewhat, as Wollstonecraft demonstrates the same dependence on appearance and quick willingness to judge which she had deprecated in her

earlier text. Admittedly, the pattern of social commentary emerging from her travel-writing does draw on an established tradition of condescension that informed many travelers' configurations of the national other; nevertheless, her constructions betray an inconsistency strange in one so overtly concerned elsewhere with questioning the significance of physical appearances. Towards the beginning of *Letters*, she reflects on humanity's sad tendency to "form an estimate of the leading traits of a character at the first glance, of which intimacy afterwards makes us almost lose sight" (37). Soon thereafter, however, she contradicts her own dictum, disparaging individuals she meets with cutting references to their features and whatever behavior she briefly observes, whether it be that of the lawyers at Laurvig whose "visages [are] deformed by vice" (93), or the well-dressed custom-house officer whose countenance displeases her (17). Similarly ironic in light of her earlier work are frequent eulogies on female beauty when she encounters it, sometimes independent of any commentary on character (42) and, at least once, in spite of apparent deficiencies in that character (78).

Such inconsistency also characterizes Wollstonecraft's descriptions of individuals with abnormal appearances and/or mental functioning. In her *Original Stories* for children, the matronly and wise governess Mrs. Mason castigates her young charges for staring incessantly at a deformed woman, likely a cognitively disabled or crippled individual, who passes them during a walk. The governess criticizes the two girls for forcing onto the woman's consciousness her own "disgusting figure" (62-63). This reprimand reveals the same kind of *attributive* assumption we encountered before, but with a twist. Mrs. Mason's words suggest that an individual's physical difference remains inert and unmapped until activated by an observer, at which point the spectator's stare indelibly inscribes *otherness* onto the observed individual. A "deformed" *identity* and sense of self, that is, does not accompany mere physical abnormality unless society

offers its negative appraisal. Through Mrs. Mason's firm instruction, Wollstonecraft calls us to account for the actions of our eyes and cautions us to avoid those imprudent gazes which can—unaided by words or physical abuse—destroy another's self-confidence. Such apparent sympathy for the impaired seems to disappear, however, during the Scandinavian tour described in her *Letters*. Wollstonecraft wields closely defined opinions more consonant with a genitive mode than an attributive one, criticizing those whose apparent mental slowness does not keep pace with her own intelligence. She has little patience with or confidence in a boatman from Fredericstadt because he appears "half a fool" (135), an equivocal comment which might well describe his appearance as well as his behavior. And she later berates a coachman whom she considers a "churlish brute":

But when we drew near the post-house, the postilion stopped short, and neither threats, nor promises, could prevail on him to go forward. He even began to howl and weep, when I insisted on his keeping his word. Nothing, indeed, can equal the stupid obstinacy of some of these half alive beings, who seem to have been made by Prometheus, when the fire he stole from Heaven was so exhausted, that he could only spare a spark to give life, not animation, to the inert clay . . . (138-39)

Her invective on this man's behavior and mental capacity—an insulting harangue delineating what may well be someone with an intellectual disability—complicates her earlier instruction, and compels us to wonder which aspects of her inconsistent teaching would impact most the daughter who idolized her.

William Godwin's best-selling *Things as They Are, or The Adventures of Caleb Williams* (1794), today recognized for its considerable formative influence on the plot arc and themes of *Frankenstein*, exhibits a similarly conflicted valuation of appearances. Taken as a whole, the novel by Mary Shelley's politically radical father appears to offer a lengthy, compelling criticism of *situational* appearances and, by association, the English courts, landed-wealth, and prison

officials who rely wholly on outward show; such politically powerful individuals naively maintain that the innocent-looking and (supposedly) victimized, very wealthy Mr. Falkland could never be guilty of deception, let alone murder. Various ideas from *Political Justice* (1796), Godwin's piece on humanity's slow but inevitable journey towards perfectibility, translate directly into his novel as he works to reify some conceptual hierarchies and dismantle others. Godwin holds fast, for instance, to classical distinctions that place refined reason far above instinctive emotion, and that value the mind much more than the body. At the same time, he challenges contemporary assumptions that differences in gender, education, and socio-economic class provide ample grounds for disenfranchisement. *Political Justice* also shares with its novelized counterpart an implicit, extended censure of individuals who—like Mr. Falkland—engage in affectation or deception because they mistakenly value reputation and appearances over truth.

Godwin's program to explode society's faulty dependence on all kinds of "appearances" proceeds steadily over the course of *Caleb Williams*, a much more palatable vehicle for his philosophical ideas than its heady, non-fiction predecessor. Moments where characters misread situations and their fellows appear everywhere throughout the novel. The appearance of convalescence in the ill Emily Melville, for instance, only signals her impending death (156). The malicious Mr. Tyrrel, who quiets a crowd's discomfiting praise of his adversary (Falkland) by spraying them with venomous invective, regains at least an "appearance of his old ascendancy" but cannot avoid feeling the "deceitfulness and uncertainty" of the townsfolk's quick deference and his own false position (86). And until the dying Mr. Falkland admits that he and not Caleb killed Tyrrel, the pursued hero finds it nearly impossible to convince anyone that he is in the right and that the law, newspapers, and nobility are all in the wrong. Like Mr.

Collins, the story's kindest but most realistically minded character, the public fears questioning their ingrained assumptions concerning person and place. Not only do Caleb's pleas in his defense ask everyone to reconsider their convictions about the existing class structure, he essentially calls them to abandon their faith in manner and appearance—to replace their peace of mind with unending, anxious guesswork about human motivation (416).

From start to finish, Caleb's situation illuminates the error of relying on appearances; the hero quickly learns to distrust his own, early appraisals of others. The revelations begin with Caleb's difficult realization that the innocent-looking and friendly Mr. Falkland is by no means a noble victim, but a murderer who compounded his crime by allowing innocent men to be convicted and executed in his place:

‘It is a melancholy consideration . . . but such is man! To have judged from appearances one would have said, this is a fellow to have taken buffets and rewards with an incorruptible mind. And yet see where it all ends! This man was capable of afterwards becoming a murderer.’ (190)

Eventually, Caleb finds himself in prison, falsely accused and—in Godwin's unambiguous criticism of the British justice system—placed in confinement with not only real criminals, but many other innocent men whose "ill fortune had rendered them victims of suspicion" (264).

Later, after Caleb has been relocated to an underground strong room where fetters bind his limbs to the floor, the hero's renewed optimism about his apparently hopeless situation demonstrates the degree to which his understanding of the world has expanded: "The situation to which I was removed was . . . the most undesirable that could be imagined, but I was not discouraged; I had for some time learned *not to judge by appearances*" (289, my emphasis).

To avoid recapture after his prisonbreak, Godwin's wrongly accused hero assumes a series of disguises with which to hide his distinctive facial features as he wanders about the country seeking refuge. While fortunately gifted at such artifice (333, 351), Caleb learns to

abhor such deception, desperately longing for the ability to move about in, not a fictitious character, but his own (391, 410). Unfortunately for him, this discomfort with disguise springs from a faith in the reliability of others' physiognomic practice, a faith Godwin will neatly explode. Caleb believes that if he can just tell his story and present his innocent features to the right people, he will be exonerated from Mr. Falkland's false accusations. He accordingly accompanies all explanations of his case with an apologia for face-reading. Caleb implores those with the power to destroy or save him, those like Mr. Forrester, to take a moment to read his countenance and recognize the innocence radiating from his face: "'I am innocent. It is in vain that circumstances are accumulated against me . . . I appeal to my heart—I appeal to my looks,'" and again, "'You are a man of penetration; look at me! do you see any of the marks of guilt?'" (252, 255). Unfortunately, no one appears willing or able to read the truth. Those most sympathetic to Caleb's plight prove unhelpful; they insist on seeing in the guilty Mr. Falkland the "very image of grief," a mild and innocent lamb who has treated Caleb's supposed betrayal of his employer with only mercy (388). Even the kind Laura, whose friendship with Caleb lasts longer than any other, cuts short their liaison under the influence of Faulkner's stooges. She ends her own relationship with Caleb by claiming that God has provided obvious, visible signals that lead directly to corresponding fact. "True virtue shines by its own light, and needs no art to set it off," she declares. Providence "has not permitted us to be left without a clue in the most important of all questions" (404). That Laura buys into the slanderous, widely disseminated tales about Caleb generated by Mr. Falkland and rejects the evidence—her personal knowledge of a dear friend—only underscores the irony of her lofty position. Again and again, Godwin explodes the facile assumption that appearances reliably signal a character or situation's true nature.

While the novel's deconstructions of naïve assumptions concerning public image involves a critique of our unthinking reliance on pathognomic readings of another's changing countenance to determine his/her shifting emotion or intent, the novel's portrayal of abnormally formed and intellectually disabled figures reveals a rather inconsistent posture towards *physiognomic* practice. On the one hand, Godwin sets up a dynamic between the hero and villain of the novel's backstory that implicitly interrogates the mapping of stable character traits by way of facial markers. The novel describes Mr. Falkland—still an amiable, sane, and honest young man at this point—as oddly dwarfish in stature, while the tyrannical and cruel Mr. Tyrrel sports a deceptively athletic, perfectly proportioned physique compelling to all of the town's nubile women. Tyrrel's sizable pride and paranoia lead him to fear that Mr. Falkland, with his monstrously diminutive stature, will try to set up a community of abnormally short people, "a new standard of human nature, adapted to his miserable condition" (76-78). We know from his subsequent actions, however, that Tyrrel himself is more a monster more than his nemesis.

Godwin interrogates physiognomic assumptions yet again when the fleeing Caleb takes on the disguise of a "twisted and deformed" figure in a desperate bid to dodge his pursuers (366). Ironically, the hero's new features win him needed assistance and affection instead of relegating him to obscurity. His very "counterfeited ugliness" insures the devotion of an older man who has recently lost a similar-looking son (366). Assuming that one deformed youth must be as worthy of love as another, Mr. Spurrel constructs for Caleb a character and role—a mold the latter eagerly fills. Here, an abnormal appearance happily fails to signal equal degeneracy of character. Godwin instead illustrates that attributive process by which an outsider *constructs* for a deformed individual an identity rooted solely in his physiognomy. Elsewhere, however, Godwin allows a naïve congruity to form between the appearance and the character of deformed

individuals, demonstrating the same kind of physiognomic swerve evidenced in his wife's writings. Caleb, thankfully "complete in all the lineaments and members of a human body" (353), finds his most dangerous adversary in a hag whose bloodshot eyes, matted hair, grossly developed musculature and savagely ferocious behavior earn her the appellation of "witch" from her rural neighbors (305, 313). Her attempt to murder Caleb in his sleep proves this archetypal villain—pulled directly from Gothic tradition—to be as degenerate in character as she is in appearance. And no wonder, for, as Caleb concludes, "*persons of her complexion* seem unable to exist without some object upon which to pour out the superfluity of their gall" (311, my emphasis).

When delineating a character whose apparent intellectual deficit compounds his deformed appearance, however, Godwin does anticipate his daughter's more enlightened approach. Grimes, whom Mr. Tyrrel encourages to rape a young woman under his own protection, proves himself another mal-proportioned figure whose character matches his physique. This time, the character's description closely matches that of an intellectually disabled individual. While none of the common nomenclature directly delineates the farmer as an "idiot" or "simpleton," the details of his appearance, manner, and mental capacity collectively categorize him as such:

He was not precisely a lad of vicious propensities, but in an inconceivable degree boorish and uncouth. His complexion was scarcely human; his features were coarse, and strangely discordant and disjointed from each other. His lips were thick, and the tone of his voice broad and unmodulated. His legs were of equal size from one end to the other, and his feet misshapen and clumsy. He had nothing spiteful or malicious in his disposition, but he was a total stranger to tenderness; he could not feel for those refinements in others, of which he had no experience in himself. He was an expert boxer: his inclination led him to such amusements as were most boisterous; and he delighted in a sort of manual sarcasm, which he could not conceive to be very injurious, as it left no traces behind it. His general manners were

noisy and obstreperous; inattentive to others; and obstinate and unyielding, not from any cruelty and ruggedness of temper, but from an incapacity to conceive those finer feelings, that make so large a part of the history of persons who are cast in a gentler mould. Such was the uncouth and half-civilised animal, which the industrious malice of Mr. Tyrrel fixed upon . . . (109-10)

By itself, the description of this “half-civilised [animal]” as a boorish and rough young boxer with an indelicate sense of humor might earn him the designation of an ill-bred, mischievous country boy. The narrator accompanies such traits, however, with a carefully conceived list of peculiarities often associated with the intellectually disabled individual, including disjointed facial features, deformed feet, and an unmodulated voice. Also, the narrator reiterates three times that this young man’s rough and offensive manners result, not from malice, but from an inability to recognize and consider others’ emotional vulnerabilities—a description consonant with that of some cognitively disabled adults. Combined with such considerations, Grimes’s later attempts to deceive and force himself on Emily seem not so much the lustful misdeeds of a calculating young man as they do the errors of one led into a criminal course of action by another; Grimes appears unable to think through the repercussions of his own actions. Godwin assigns the young man the conventional roughness and unfeeling behavior his audience would expect from an intellectually disadvantaged character, but he mitigates Grimes’s actions by revealing their origins. The diabolical Mr. Tyrrel has, that is, *constructed* for Grimes a villainous identity to match his appearance, a role the ignorant dupe accepts as readily as he might any other.

Mary Shelley would ultimately privilege this attributive paradigm in her own fiction, illuminating so as to disassemble physiognomic formulae. At times, however, she can seem as inconsistent as her parents. Their irregular example, combined with what Sunstein suggests was Shelley’s own complicated history regarding beauty issues, inevitably shaped the novelist’s own,

varied practice. At times, Shelley draws on conventions consistent with the old neo-Socratic concept of *kalokagathia*, equating beauty with virtue or disagreeable appearances with disagreeable personalities. After all, the young author had especially alluring eyes and was considered quite the beauty, an attribute of which she was occasionally rather vain (Sunstein 135, 208, 146). Just as frequently, however, Mary Shelley would probe the physiognomic equation, discarding genitive assumptions for more complex explanations of an individual's behavior. Perhaps the old formula grew distasteful as she wearied of others' appraisals of her appearance, opinions not always favorable, and at times condescending with a thin veneer of praise (Sunstein 134, 187).¹⁴ Her apparently inconsistent physiognomic practice might also have been shaped by dissatisfaction with conventional costume and an increasing desire to confound social expectations and demonstrate her freedom of expression by manipulating her appearance (Sunstein 103, and Journals 158-59 *footnote*). Perhaps she decided early on that while she would follow literary convention and assign beauty to virtuous heroines, she would do what she could elsewhere to destabilize such easy physiognomic prescriptions. Such a progressive posture would surely have been encouraged by her own childhood experience with an ostracizing and very visible physical abnormality (a skin disease that resulted in temporary relocation to Scotland while she recovered), as well as her relationship with Mary Diana Dods, one whose slightly humped back and bizarre appearance likely encouraged Shelley to question further the kind of attributions society made when regarding differently formed individuals (Sunstein 54-56, 59, 273).

Whatever the complex of social, literary and biographical factors involved, Mary Shelley successfully moved beyond physiognomic inclinations and genitive assumptions about self and society. Stepping beyond the visual realm which she so valued, she envisioned in her fiction a

new, fundamentally compassionate posture towards deformed and intellectually disabled figures, methodically revealing and criticizing that attributive process by which society assigned such individuals a villainous character. In her most famous novel, she repeatedly melds down the identity of the richly symbolic Gothic monster into its constituent parts, a process which revealed society's culpability in forging that defective identity. By adopting this enlightened approach when creating differently formed characters, Shelley embraced the more ethically responsible option of the two offered by her parents, pushing aside the easy face-reading blueprints she elsewhere so unconsciously accepted.

The Beholder's Eye: *Matilda's* Visual Architecture

The significance of such a move becomes clearer when we examine Shelley's heavy reliance upon visual acts and visual tropes in her fiction, a dependence much more fundamental than the concession to physiognomic principles discussed previously, and far greater than that evidenced in her parents' work. In *Women, Fire and Dangerous Things* (1987), George Lakoff argues that many of the categories and metaphors which infiltrate our language both reflect our perceptual experience in a material world, and in turn shape and regulate our understanding of that world. While modern audiologists would be quick to offer audition as the most fundamental sense with regards to such sensuous experience,¹⁵ Mary Shelley would likely have joined a contemporary writer for the familiar *Quarterly Review* in affirming that "The ear, however useful as the instrument of communication, has less to do with the direct acquisition of ideas than any of the other organs of sense; and in promoting this end there is none so instrumental as the eye."¹⁶

Shelley's early novella *Matilda* (1819; pub. 1959), though unknown to the reading public of the time, provides the modern reader a useful example of the extensive visual apparatus undergirding much of her fiction. Detailed descriptions of characters' thoughts and emotions are frequently conveyed with visual metaphors, and eyes themselves often stand for an entire person, demonstrating the kind of synecdochical acts inherent in any physiognomical practice.¹⁷ Eyes also play familiar metonymic roles, alternately devouring, seeking, controlling, envying, and loving (15, 45, 41, 55, 60). Characters' closing their eyes repeatedly signals despair (18, 51, 62), and opening eyes in a crucial moment conveys a last gift of love (53). When characters first appear, their physical features receive considerable attention from the narrator, an emphasis consistent with the consideration these characters later give to one another's appearances.¹⁸ Shelley's attention to physical characteristics contrasts sharply with the practice of, say, Jane Austen; one would be hard pressed to find such emphases in the character descriptions of Shelley's famous contemporary.¹⁹

Though dialogue shapes destinies and destroys lives in *Matilda*, as in Percy Bysshe Shelley's companion drama, *The Cenci* (1819), a complex network of visual gestures shapes the plot at least as much as any other modes of discourse.²⁰ When Mathilda's father reveals his incestuous passion for her in the tale's climax, he asks forgiveness for a double-edged sin that even now combines the power of words with the force of the objectifying gaze:

“My dear Child[:] I have betrayed your confidence . . . and have made your innocent heart acquainted with the *looks* and *language* of unlawful and monstrous passion.” (32, my emphasis)

Here and elsewhere, narrative tension ebbs and flows with shifting desire for the visible (or imagined) subject, pulled and pushed by a compelling, continuous exchange of glances and face-readings. In fact, the pattern of gazes and eye motions apparent in the relationships between

Woodville and Elinor, Mathilda and Woodville and, most importantly, Mathilda and her father, provides a compelling outline of the narrative that could exist independent of any accompanying dialogue. A brief consideration of Shelley's use of visual action and metaphor in shaping the relationship of Mathilda and her father should help carry this point.

Abandoned to an aunt's care because Mathilda's grieving father must "never see" the one whose delivery killed his cherished wife, Shelley's heroine grows up longing for a father she has never known (10). She directs all her affection towards a miniature of him upon which she regularly gazes while dreaming of the future, her "imagination [hanging] upon the scene of recognition" (14). On her sixteenth birthday, Mathilda reads with "devouring eyes" a first letter from her father, whose "desire to see" her grows as he approaches (14). After the happy reunion, he relates how the vision of her "little fairy form" sustained him during years of wandering, how the sun shone and the moon rose on her "living form" (16). Mathilda revels in his tales, finding his love for her dance across his features each time she raises her eyes (18).

The fatal transformation in her father, which we later discover involves growing sexual passion, manifests itself in "frowns where before [she] had been welcomed only with smiles," "brows contracted," and "eyes fixed in sullen fierceness on the ground" (19). In an attempt to rediscover the "love-breathing countenance" to which she was so drawn, Mathilda looks upon him when he is off his guard, and occasionally finds his eyes wet with tears (20). More frequently, she finds a discomfiting, new kind of gaze, one accompanied by a shaking frame that betrays intense inner conflict (20-21). In an attempt to rein in his passions, her father fixes his eyes on the ground, keeping from her "the dark full orbs in which before [she] delighted to read all sweet and gentle feeling," but Mathilda finds that, despite his apparent self-constraint, his eyes relentlessly follow her slightest movements (21). His behavior becomes more capricious,

his eyes glaring like lightning one moment, radiating gentleness the next, and then turning their "deep and liquid" surfaces upon her with a "strange and awful" look which—set in a convulsing countenance—completely overwhelms her (22).

Their social intercourse remains constrained, her father speaking only through his eyes, “their black, full luster” containing something “so . . . intense” that she can never meet them without bursting into tears (23). She eventually forces him to divulge his secret, challenging him: “Do not then continue to fix your eyes on the earth; raise them on me for I can read your soul in them,” and she fixes her “earnest eyes” on him in anticipation (26). His passionate proclamation finally comes, accompanied by a gaze which “convulse[s] every nerve and member of [her] frame” (28). Mathilda nearly faints and, enervated by despair, can only look at him as he voices one last ode to her beauty and sinks to the ground (28).

The importance of ocular action in this tale is irrefutable: visual movements and motifs weave throughout every relationship and pivotal event, not just those that most obviously turn on issues of gazing and desire. *Matilda* also contains elements of those particular brands of physiognomy which Shelley develops more thoroughly in her full-length novels. In addition to readily engaging in pathognomy, her characters indulge in a physiognomic practice that privileges brows and eyes. Some trait like wisdom or charity usually sits atop a figure’s forehead, the eyes beneath providing an even more reliable index of the character’s true nature. The phrenological emphasis given the brow echoes the practice of Lavater, whose own strain of physiognomy privileged this area as one of the countenance’s more fixed, and thus apparently more reliable, features (Rivers 76, 83).²¹ Lavater dismissed as too variable, however, those twin windows to the soul which some earlier physiognomists like the seventeenth-century painter Charles Le Brun join Mary Shelley in favoring.²² Where le Brun’s method pivoted on the exact

positioning of an eye's inner corner, and rapidly developed into zoological comparisons between his models and animals vaguely similar in appearance (Sorel 5), in Shelley's works the eyes more often convey their owner's character by some vague quality such as their light. Characters' eyes beam, sparkle, or burn with fire, alternately denoting such disparate traits as intelligence, altruism, and prophetic power.²³ The nebulous descriptor "luster" proves a favorite, a quality Shelley turns deftly to positive or negative effect.²⁴ In using these terms so fluidly, Shelley mirrors another characteristic of Lavater's practice: despite his grand assertions about a new lexicon which would swallow old anxieties about language's limitations, he never delineated a clear system of signs and signifiers by which one might appropriately read one's fellows.

The practical effects of physiognomical acts within Mary Shelley's works, however, prove far less ambiguous than the system by which such judgments are made. In *Matilda*, most of the characters appear beautiful and the figure they cut accordingly so, a reflexivity consonant with the kind of easy, physiognomical formula that appeared in the works of Shelley's parents. These characterizations, however, merely provide a background for the main event, the development and revelation of an incestuous passion Shelley shows to be *attributive* in nature. As Mathilda's father contends, that is, her beauty elicits an inevitable and necessary sexual attraction, one which transforms a beloved daughter into the object of his inappropriate fantasy. Though she immediately rejects the abhorrent identity he has fashioned for her, Mathilda nevertheless becomes a monster in her own eyes. Her rejection of her father's passion is quickly followed by his suicide, an event which clips the arrow's shaft while leaving the barb inside to fester. Her previous joie de vivre disappears, and she isolates herself from humankind, finding only the briefest reprieve in Woodville's kind friendship. Mathilda's father may have claimed the role of monster for himself (28, 32), but she internalizes his deadly guilt to the point where

she considers *herself* monstrous, one whose countenance now betrays a “sign . . . a gloomy mark” visible to any who look too closely (61):

I must never among my fellow creatures, either by word or look give allowance to the smallest conjecture of the dread reality: I must shrink before the eye of man lest he should read my father’s guilt in my glazed eyes. (41)

Beyond Physiognomy: Deformity, Idiocy and the Attributive Method

In *Matilda*, Shelley successfully demonstrates how even the inverse of physical deformity—beauty—can become the site for another’s unwanted inscriptions. She wields her attributive paradigm with similar precision when deconstructing superficial readings of figures whose physical features lie outside society’s construction of normal. The anti-hero of “The Evil Eye” (1829) loses his refinement and gentle disposition when deprived of first his daughter and then his good looks, a shift in personality which at first glance appears consonant with physiognomic principles:

Who in the mutilated savage could recognise the handsomest amongst the Arnaoots? His habits kept pace with his change of physiognomy—he grew ferocious and hard-hearted . . . he had arrived at that worst state of ruffian feeling, the taking delight in blood . . . his mind became reckless, his countenance more dark; men trembled before his glance, women and children exclaimed in terror, ‘The Evil Eye!’ The opinion became prevalent—he shared it himself—he gloried in the dread privilege . . . (101)

Embedded in the description of Dmitri’s change, however, lies an explanation of the process by which society promotes this transformation. He adopts a monstrous identity which reflects his new look because he is encouraged to do so by others—this shift is engendered and sustained by, not just the deep gash which has disfigured his eyebrow and cheek, but others’ reactions to that scar. Shelley’s narrator undercuts this accepted link between face and temperament by

denouncing those who fear Dmitri's appearance, writing off their reactions as the predictable products of Greek superstition translated into an endemic prejudice against the deformed, a prejudice they allow to infect even the youngest child (103-4). The inadequacy of the majority's perceptions grows clearer when Dmitri proves himself better than his appearance might suggest. He puts aside his bloodthirsty tendencies to save a detested child from certain death, a child he later decides to protect with his life (114, 116).

Much of Shelley's fiction, including tales like *Matilda* and "The Evil Eye," actively interrogates configurations of the outrageously beautiful or significantly deformed, revealing a strong leaning towards an attributive paradigm. Such an inclination also appears in a few notable stories containing characters whose descriptions and treatment match more closely those of the intellectually disabled individual. Shelley's "Transformation" (1830) delivers a multi-pronged assault on the application of physiognomical principles to the physically different person. In addition to offering a male protagonist whose handsome features prove to mask deceptively a degenerate wastrel, Shelley introduces a severely misshapen dwarf whose appearance and apparent scheming serve to mask a secret, altruistic agenda. The appearance of this monster, with his spider's claws, screeching voice, and frightening contortions (292-93), quickly aligns him with the idiot figure who is "commonly depicted as stunted, dwarfish, and deformed" (Andrews 183). For a time, the dwarf follows that genitive prescription for an evil dwarf advanced by medieval and early modern tradition, matching his actions to the costume of deformity he wears. He fools the unsuspecting narrator into lending him his beautiful body so that he (the dwarf) can attempt to marry the hero's beloved. This deception and even the dwarf's later attempts to kill the narrator are ultimately subsumed, however, by a conclusion which suggests the dwarf was a good spirit in disguise, one sent by the narrator's guardian angel to pull

him out of his downward spiral towards moral disaster (300). In other words, although the dwarf's deceitful and murderous align with the expectations of a society prejudiced against short, deformed, and perhaps intellectually disabled individuals, he surprisingly turns these actions to good purpose—the salvation of the hero's soul.

The characterization of Bindo in the novel *Valperga: or, the Life and Adventures of Castruccio, Prince of Lucca* (1823) may lack the sensational explosion of physiognomic principles we find in "Transformation," where characters slide out of their own bodies and into another's as if flesh were a cloak to be swapped, but the garb of the intellectually disabled figure fits this dwarf even more snugly, in terms of mental capacity as well as appearance. Shelley's second novel demonstrates just how easily society's assumptions can shape an intellectually challenged individual's course and self-perception. The entire novel, in fact, can be read not just as what Sunstein calls an elaborate lesson in the error of different kinds of idolatry (189) but, more specifically, as a sustained deconstruction of different kinds of appearances, one similar in breadth to Godwin's *Caleb Williams*.²⁵ Though Shelley again allows beautiful heroines their accordingly virtuous character and assigns to the tale's ugly witch predictably cunning and sadistic tendencies, her didactic narrator dissects both the apparent prophetic skills of Beatrice and those equally specious, magical powers of the witch Mandragola. She also makes an extended project of dissecting the character of Castruccio, the anti-hero whose pleasant façade belies his increasing malevolence throughout most of the novel.²⁶

The appearance of Bindo the dwarf proves similarly misleading. This stunted albino wears a physiognomy that seems to denote a "want of judgement, courage, and all the mere manly virtues," an odd appearance which earns him the enmity of the neighboring peasants who consider him the evil son of a witch (102-3). The short, ostracized little man proves the

inaccuracy of such evaluations, however, when he charges into battle. His words may demonstrate more “wild and imaginative originality” than intelligent wit, and his simple mind approach “the feebler spark of *animal* life,” but he by no means lacks bravery, a trait his features fail to signal (102, my emphasis).²⁷ He helps lead the defense of Valperga and, convinced their cause will succeed in the end, risks his life in the defense of his mistress (211-12, 221).

Physiognomy and prejudice once again fail to determine character.

The weakness of his reason and some superstitious leanings do make Bindo rather malleable in the hands of others, however, demonstrating again the potentially formative powers of society’s expectations. Aware of his mental deficiencies (229, 272), he remains unable to bypass them and shape his own destiny in the face of others’ overpowering influence. Instead, Beatrice’s father, Beatrice, and finally the witch herself each construct identities for him, *attributing* to him the character of a bold and resolute servant of truth, or a gullible and foolish minion obedient to another’s apparent mastery over the supernatural. With the same ease that he adopts the offered role of a faithful servant who will stay by Euthanasia’s bedside during a long illness (230), this intellectually disabled figure naively bends to the machinations of a bitter old woman who deems him but a “puny abortion” (269) and who easily convinces him that she can control the forces of Nature (232-33).

Frankenstein: Monstrous Image, Blind Truth

Frankenstein exhibits the same preoccupation with acts of perception evidenced in Mary Shelley’s other works. Characters often reference visual *images* when recounting their actual and imagined interactions with others, for example, in descriptions that could just as easily have relied on the speakers’ relating their *thoughts* in the given situation, the *emotions* generated by

the concerned parties, or the actual exchange of *dialogue*. Each character employs these various descriptive modes at one time or another, of course, but sighted and imagined images play a markedly dominant role in shaping narration. The creature explains his affinity for the de Lacey's as a force which grows "[t]he more I saw of them," his failed encounter with Felix as a "horrible scene . . . for ever acting before my eyes" (98, 102), and his plans to leave for South America as a "picture" which will completely remove him and his future companion from civilization, so that "neither you nor any other human being shall ever see us again" (109). Likewise with his nemesis. Frankenstein employs a visual metaphor when initially refusing to make a female counterpart for the creature: "You may render me the most miserable of men, but you shall never make me base in my own eyes" (108). Having finally acquiesced and removed to another country to work on the hated project, Frankenstein describes the Scottish cottage where he works as a place where he lives "ungazed at and unmolested" and, after reneging on his promise, declares his new determination to delete "the monstrous *image*" he mistakenly created (127, 221, my emphasis).²⁸ Later, after his anxious father has expressed concern that his strangely depressed son follow through with plans to marry Elizabeth, Frankenstein assures his father by overriding the patriarch's encouraging visions of a shared life together with sexually charged appreciation of Elizabeth's visible qualities: "'I never saw any woman who excited, as Elizabeth does, my warmest admiration and affection'" (116).

The novel also contains all the peripheral visual accoutrements one would expect in a tale preoccupied, as we shall see, with physiognomic acts and what Rosemary Garland-Thompson and others have termed "the stare."²⁹ Shelley's protagonist and his friend Clerval, for instance, employ the same evaluative apparatus Shelley used in her travel writings. At times, the descriptions of their long journeys through Europe sound as if they were culled from the author's

own journal or letters. Frankenstein feasts on a “picturesque” section of the Rhine which runs between “beautiful” hills, and contrasts the ferocious and sublime crags of the Orkney Islands—a “place fitted” for creation of the creature’s hideous female companion—with the “fair lakes” and “gentle sky” of his home in Switzerland (119, 127). Elsewhere, Shelley suggests that one’s relative facility at “reading” and being, in turn, appropriately affected by one of Nature’s more astounding prospects provides an accurate indicator of his psychological state. Shelley accentuates Frankenstein’s morbid preoccupation and depression following the creature’s account of his own development, for instance, by describing the hero’s failure to be excited by the “majestic scenes” through which he moves on his way to England (118). The ingenuous and guiltless Clerval, on the other hand, proves “alive to every new scene; joyful when he saw the beauties of the setting sun He pointed out to me the shifting colours of the landscape, and the appearances of the sky” (118).

In the two centuries since a critic for the *Quarterly Review* excoriated *Frankenstein* as stupid and confusing—“a tale / Told by an idiot [sic], full of sound and fury, / Signifying nothing”—critics have harvested a rich crop of heterogeneous *somethings* from the novel.³⁰ Gilbert and Gubar’s memorable interpretation of the creature as a disguised representation of monstrous womanhood has in recent years sparked other, equally provocative readings of Frankenstein’s nemesis.³¹ These range from the sociopsychological idea that the creature is a battered child become battered parent, to the assertion that he acts as therapeutic container for the exorcised, primal emotions of “the primitive Mary Shelley [herself]: her guilt at being her mother’s killer-reincarnation, her rage that her father abandoned her, and her resentment of her half brother, William.”³² Shelley’s novel has also been praised for critiquing western society’s

preoccupation with beauty.³³ This particular preoccupation, which disenfranchises the physically disabled and the disfigured today as it did in Shelley's era, also contributes to the isolation and disempowerment of vision-impaired individuals who remain ever the subject—never the source—of the delimiting gaze, as well as the intellectually disabled individuals whose conspicuous behavioral and linguistic distinctiveness is often compounded by measurable bodily difference. *Frankenstein*, concerned most directly with disfigured individuals, also rigorously questions the cultural values that work to circumscribe and devalue these other two, differently enabled populations.

The frontispiece of the 1831 edition (Appendix A) rather appropriately prefigures the novel's physiognomic concerns, containing within its frame a dynamic network of intersecting gazes issuing from creature, creator, and the hollow eye sockets of a supine skeleton on the laboratory floor. Over the course of the novel, such charged stares fly at the creature from everyone with eyes to trace his features, followed closely by equally pitiless action. No foil appears for the many who flee or the few who attack, for little William who curses, beloved Felix who strikes, and the ungrateful man who shoots him for his pains in rescuing a drowning girl. We have no proof that what he says to Frankenstein of the "multitude of mankind" does not indeed generalize to everyone with eyes to see: "If [they] knew of my existence, they would do as you do, and arm themselves for my destruction" (75). If by some chance the beholder does not attack when facing this abomination, fleeing or fainting prove the only viable alternatives. Even the creature's designer, who is temporarily convinced by his creation's logic and allows himself to feel some empathy for his situation, fails to see beyond the abnormal appearance of the "monster." As Frankenstein eventually admits, "I compassionated him, and sometimes felt a wish to console him; but when I looked upon him, when I saw the filthy mass that moved and

talked, my heart sickened, and my feelings were altered to those of horror and hatred” (109-10). The creature sees matters quite clearly when he asserts that there can be no community between himself and humanity, for ““the human senses are insurmountable barriers to our union”” (108).

The humans the creature encounters react adversely to his presence in part because his features and early behavior resemble those of the despised “idiot,” a parallel suggested by psychologist and activist’s Burton Blatt’s own comparison of the creature with “retarded” individuals.³⁴ Though Blatt’s reflections never venture beyond the realm of analogy, Mary Shelley provides ample evidence that popular pseudo-medical and physiognomic notions concerning the idiot informed her construction of the creature, especially as it appears in its early, developmental stages. Consider the scattered evidence. The creature’s gigantic stature and enormous features—like the contrasting unusually small limbs and features of a Little Person—have been long associated with mental retardation in the popular imagination (Andrews 194). The creature’s “convulsive motion” brings to mind the species of seizure which often plagues such individuals, and his yellow and watery eyes in their “dun-white sockets” (40) recall the “vacant expressions” and “bulging eyes” which form part of the popular taxonomy (Morison 223, Andrews 184). The monster’s description, as sketched by the horrified scientist who awakens from a nightmare to find the creature staring at him, matches item for item contemporary descriptions of the idiot’s “‘imbecilic expression,’ ‘unmeaning grimace,’ and the ‘fixed and unmeaning stare’” (Wright 287), as well as the gaping mouth (Andrews 184) and capacity “to articulate only a few syllables or words to which [he] seem[s] to attach no meaning” (Morison 217).

He held up the curtain of the bed; and his eyes, if eyes they may be called, were fixed on me. His jaws opened, and he muttered some inarticulate sounds, while a grin wrinkled his cheeks. (40)

So too does the creature's ability to perceive and yet not (initially) differentiate amongst the data gathered by his five senses recall the limitations of a severely intellectually disabled individual: "No distinct ideas occupied my mind; all was confused. I felt light, and hunger, and thirst, and darkness; innumerable sounds rung in my ears" (77).³⁵ His awkward mobility from the moment of his "birth" also suggests the functioning of an intellectually disabled individual more than that of a newborn, a consideration which helps resolve the apparent incongruity between his experience and his abilities, a discrepancy complained of by at least one of Shelley's contemporaries.³⁶ The pleasure the creature takes in the mysterious moon's radiance recalls that experienced by the hero of Wordsworth's "The Idiot Boy" (1798), and the delight he registers in the song of birds—the first sound he is able to recognize and enjoy—aligns him with a series of idiots and imbeciles whose countenances Dr. Alexander Morison interpreted during the 1820s and 30s, some of whom were similarly able to enjoy music but little else.³⁷ The spectacle presented by the creature at this point, with his irregular appearance compounded by his mentally and linguistically imbecilic state, would have represented a mix of rather irritating qualities to Shelley's contemporaries.

Obviously, the monster's capacity does not remain that of a mentally disabled individual. Though Shelley's medical contemporaries recognized the educability of many individuals dealing with intellectual limitations—so that *some* improvement in the creature would have accorded with contemporary optimism concerning the idiot's potential—the creature's subsequent, transformed understanding and facility with language move him far beyond the intellectual powers and speech of any idiot (and most educated people, for that matter).³⁸ He never, however, escapes that distinctive appearance which earns him what Shelley carefully casts as the unmerited attributions of villain and monster, attributions which slowly pound the creature

into accepting them as true. Only then does he become a monster to himself as well as to others, a murderous villain whose self-perception matches people's expectations in a manner that fulfills what Blatt most fears for members of the intellectually disabled community.³⁹

This extended critique of physiognomic prejudices is the more effective because in *Frankenstein*, as demonstrated earlier, Shelley again leans heavily on ocular motion and metaphor. The narrative's inquiry into vision's reliability will become, in essence, an interrogation of its own rhetorical structure: visual acts provide an unmistakable framework for character communication and plot action in Shelley's most famous novel. The opening of a "dull yellow eye" signals the creature's very first movement, while the wateriness of the orbs in their "dun-white sockets" provides what the aesthetically narrow-minded Frankenstein considers a most horrible contrast with the creature's pearly teeth and luxurious hair (39-40). When the creature peers through the frightened scientist's bed-curtain only hours later, he effectively reverses this dynamic between spectator and spectacle with his own gaze, a gaping look which torments Frankenstein through the rest of the novel, lingering in his mind's eye even when the increasingly dangerous creature is nowhere to be seen (40, 140). Only with Frankenstein's death does this menacing image fade from the scientist's mind, replaced in the reader's ken by the remorseful creature himself as he stands over the body and details plans to follow his creator's example, ending sight and life with one act. The strange synecdoche he uses to describe the approaching suicide (he longs "for the moment when these hands will meet my eyes . . .") underscores one of the novel's implied lessons, that the blessing of vision can become a curse (169). Similarly, in arguably his most poetic moment, the creature describes his entry into the world and his approaching exit in terms of changing access to compelling *images*:

I shall no longer see the sun or stars, or feel the winds play on my cheeks. Light, feeling, and sense will pass away; and in this condition

must I find my happiness. Some years ago, when the images which
this world affords first opened upon me . . . I should have wept to die;
now it is my only consolation. (170)

This linking of loss of sight with loss of life seems apropos given that, as Martha Stoddard Holmes explains in *Fictions of Affliction* (2004), medical practitioners in the nineteenth century not only treated blindness as a trope for disease, they often equated vision impairment with death itself (63-64). Mary Shelley works hard to disrupt this formula her anti-hero so pathetically adopts, offering an empowering depiction of that disability which—for the impaired individual at least—completely removes visual cues from the social equation. Shelley’s consideration of nonsightedness begins when Frankenstein describes the visual processes which follow an overwhelming stimulus, a blinding burst of lightning reflected off a lake’s surface and into his eyes:

Vivid flashes of lightning dazzled my eyes, illuminating the lake,
making it appear like a vast sheet of fire; then for an instant
everything seemed of a pitchy darkness, until the eye recovered
itself from the preceding flash. (54)

This description of the Genevan countryside during a severe storm serves an instructive as well as dramatic purpose, briefly explaining the temporary vision loss and recovery that follow a lightning strike. Elsewhere, Shelley explores this same boundary between sight and blindness metaphorically, exploring the impairment’s conceptual resonance in related figures of speech. Frankenstein, reliving the horrors of recent months, describes his long ignorance of the creature’s murderous plans as a kind of *blindness* (146-47). He also likens an ostensible moment of clairvoyance—in which he imagines the creature and his future mate wreaking havoc on the world—to the removal of a film that has blocked his vision: “I, for the first time, saw clearly” (132). Frankenstein and his father seem to share an affinity for such tropes, calling themselves blind in common, colloquial fashion as they align vision impairment with equally troublesome

ignorance of useful knowledge (116, 219).⁴⁰ While passages from Frankenstein's narrative suggest that blindness—real or figurative—denotes an unhealthy ignorance of important knowledge, the climax in the creature's own tale actually equates vision impairment with a valuable, if rare, fair-mindedness. The moment just before the creature assigns himself the indelible stamp of “monster” involves a surprisingly hopeful confrontation between the creature and the elder De Lacey, between one ostracized for his appearance and a blind man whose very deficiency holds the promise of real communion.

To the despondent and isolated creature who silently observes the De Laceys through a crack in their cottage wall, the family's visually impaired patriarch betokens a final opportunity for relationship. The education in language and social customs unwittingly given the hidden creature provide him the tools with which to request what he desires even more than a means of communication, an emotional connection and (what the novel's frame narrator also desperately desires) a friend. In many ways, the elderly musician seems a likely enough conduit between the creature and the society which has so completely rejected him. De Lacey's musical skill with the guitar and his disability both suggest a figure accustomed to alternate modes of intercourse. He cannot see the picturesque forests around him, nor the beloved faces that front him in the evening hours. Dispossessed of what John Locke called “that most instructive of our senses,”⁴¹ De Lacey must peer beyond the physiognomic map traced by others and regard the personality lurking behind the physical façade. Unlike Shelley's characters who depend on a network of looks and gazes to navigate the social space, he “reads” his companions by listening closely to the cadence and intonation of their voices as much as to their words, discerning the emotion which hides behind their brave declarations. De Lacey's sensitivity to his children's plight—betrayed on his features only when they leave him alone in the cottage—establishes the

vision-impaired paterfamilias as the perfect, sympathetic auditor for one whose interactions with the seeing-enabled have consistently failed.

The innovative dynamic Shelley sets up between these characters, in a novel she once depreciated as “a juvenile attempt of mine,” accomplishes a remarkable reversal of what Stoddard Holmes identifies as the unquestioned rhetorical relationship between the physically disabled individual and his observer in much nineteenth-century discourse.⁴² Stoddard Holmes suggests that the very presence of an impairment produced (and still produces) an asymmetrical interpersonal dynamic, what she calls “an emotional exchange system” linking the able-bodied with the disabled (29). This relationship usually designates the individual with physical impairment as the receiver of the observer’s sympathy and anticipated acts of pity. Shelley flips this assumed power structure on its head by assigning agency to the blind and exiled De Lacey, setting up a situation where *he* will extend the hand of compassion.

For a few, prolonged moments at the center of her novel, Shelley boldly frames as normative—even ideal—an exchange between two characters ostracized by society, one a physically disabled and elderly man wrongly separated from his homeland, the other a dramatically disfigured, homeless man-baby. Having recognized De Lacey’s suitability as a point of entry, the creature approaches him while the cottage’s other inhabitants are absent, hoping successful communication with the father figure will lead to communion with the family. After the creature timorously relates his friendless circumstances and his desire for companionship with some (strategically unnamed) persons of his acquaintance, De Lacey articulates a radically optimistic formula for human relationship:

‘Do not despair . . . the hearts of men, when unprejudiced by any obvious self-interest, are full of brotherly love and charity. Rely, therefore, on your hopes; and if these friends are good and amiable, do not despair.’ (100)

The oppressed De Lacey evinces a tried and tested faith in humanity's potential for acceptance and understanding, an idealism reminiscent of Mary Shelley's father William Godwin and the early Adam Smith. De Lacey waves aside the creature's concern about a "fatal prejudice" which "clouds [the] eyes" of those the creature has targeted for friendship, arguing that if his visitor is as virtuous as those he wishes to approach, a meeting of minds will inevitably occur (100). De Lacey offers himself as intermediary, noting that while blindness prevents him from reading his supplicant's countenance, he detects honesty in the other's voice and will vouch for him. Unfortunately, as ensuing events painfully suggest, even the most enlightened sight-enabled individual can allow himself to be swayed by aesthetic prejudice. De Lacey's kind son Felix and the cottage's female inhabitants open the door onto this tête-à-tête, physiognomic assumptions precipitate instantaneous judgment, and the creature finds himself violently removed from the family he had hoped to enchant with his goodwill, his hopes dashed and his murderous destiny set in motion by a set of scrutinizing stares.

While offering a tantalizing glimpse of a disabled community, *Frankenstein* ultimately offers no sustainable social network for those manifesting physical or cognitive difference. The fruitful exchange between De Lacey and the creature ends abruptly, and the novel prevents any renewal of such relations by eliminating most of its primary characters. Mary Shelley's dystopic *The Last Man* (1826), an even gloomier novel that tracks the erasure of the entire human race, ironically provides a more stable and persistent (though ultimately doomed) space for the infirm and disabled, a vulnerable yet promising relational environment that emerges during the most catastrophic kind of societal decline. Nestled between the emotional poles established by the heavily biographical Book I and a very bleak conclusion in which the narrator alone inhabits the

planet, snapshots appear of a society that *could have been*—an organic, inclusive community that assimilates all kinds of embodied and cognitive difference as it adapts to a rapidly changing social order.

Mary Shelley indulges in prolonged, romanticized reminiscing as she works through the treasured lives and recent deaths of friends and family in the novel's first volume.⁴³ The roman à clef that launches *The Last Man* lingers tenderly over past interactions with her husband, half-sister, and close friends, creating a most idyllic atmosphere in the most purple of prose styles. The first section also, however, reveals problems, fault lines running underneath the ostensibly healthy society in which Lionel Verney resides. Before the narrator is taken under the wing of Adrian, a character almost identical to Shelley's husband Percy Bysshe Shelley, Lionel lives a criminal lifestyle on the outskirts of a rigidly hierarchical society unsympathetic to its untitled and impoverished denizens. The audaciously egalitarian principles of Adrian—a progressive aristocrat who wishes to eliminate systems of power inimical to interdependence and community—fail to convince in a political atmosphere that privileges the flamboyant egotism of those like the Byronic war hero Raymond, one for whom “*self-gratification*” provides a “paramount object” (38, my emphasis). The government prefers the old stabilities of a rigid, if slightly unstable, social hierarchy to the shifting ground of a more level but fluid playing field. Adrian's “frank and unsuspecting mind” proves as impotent in the mercenary social climate as it initially does in the political (37). His delicate and trusting nature just cannot accommodate the caprice presently governing human relations; when the fickle Evadne jilts him, he lands in an insane asylum for a time, “this ill world” having proven itself “no clime for [his] gentle spirit” (37). It takes the world's becoming *literally* ill for the idealistic Adrian to find his place: a society thrown into chaos by disease will learn to value Adrian's delicate sensibilities and his

compassionate worldview—an egalitarian vision which will draw civilization’s survivors towards a new order within which even his arrogant, classist mother must admit that love is “the only good of life” (300).

The current, pre-plague social order also fails to encourage relational solidarity among the other characters. The passionate marriage of a marginally tamed Raymond and his lover Perdita soon ruptures under the pressure of Raymond’s dishonesty, hubris, and emotional infidelity. Lionel, too, encounters relational difficulties, in his case prompted by self-imposed gender prescriptions that discourage what he desires most, the freedom to openly express the emotional tenor of his thoughts and affections:

I discerned the trace of manacles on his bared wrist. I heard my sister’s sobs, and thought, happy are women who can weep, and in a passionate caress disburthen the oppression of their feelings; shame and habitual restraint hold back a man. I would have given worlds to have acted as in days of boyhood, have strained him to my breast, pressed his hand to my lips, and wept over him
(137)

In a relationally complicated and emotionally inhibited society shaped by constrictive notions of masculinity, shame and pride prevent Lionel from revealing the tears that fall when a dear friend returns after months in captivity.

The entrance of the death-dealing plague in Volume II stamps dramatically new relational rules onto western civilization as it erases those institutional structures that once ordered interpersonal associations. The dwindling numbers who survive each onslaught of the disease discover that, just as they can no longer depend upon the fading structures of government and church to define or defend them, they cannot afford those luxuries of deceit, selfishness, and emotional evasion which once complicated their relationships. The national boundaries that dissolve under the pressures of mass immigration parallel the erasure of more personal

insularities. The reserved Lionel, for instance, learns rather quickly to express himself in a decidedly “unmanly” manner as multitudes die en masse about him, opening himself up to an ongoing process of intense, shared bereavement with a shrinking circle of family and friends (189-90, 257, 278).

Adrian, meanwhile, organizes the survivors around a new, intensely interdependent model of community. In the face of the ultimate equalizer, the new social order values every survivor as “a gem” of infinite worth, regardless of their physical, mental, or social status (251).

There was but one good and one evil in the world—life and death. The pomp of rank, the assumption of power, the possessions of wealth vanished like morning mist. One living beggar had become of more worth than a national peerage of dead lords . . . than of dead heroes, patriots, or men of genius . . . (229)

Adrian drives home the ethical ramifications of the new, classless society when faced with an imminent conflict between England’s remaining soldiers and a lawless force of foreign invaders, an encounter sure to eliminate a large percentage of the few Europeans still living. Stepping onto the field of battle just as the first cannons fire, the charismatic leader prevents a bloodbath by proclaiming a new transnational brotherhood that will transform any death that day into an act of fratricide. He then directs the attention of friends and foes to a dying soldier whom he lifts into his arms, a compassionate act which turns the prevailing mood, “late fiercely bent on universal massacre,” into shared anxiety as everyone listens fearfully to the soldier’s labored breathing. The soldier’s death only moments later metonymically inscribes the new life-economy onto all present: “The fate of the world seemed bound up in the death of this single man. On either side the bands threw down their arms . . . a gush of love and deepest amity filled every heart” (235).

Practically speaking, the new social doctrine and its subsequent, dramatically different rubric for relationship translate into an unwillingness to abandon *anyone* to disease and isolation. When Lionel, Adrian, and the country's scattered remnants finally leave England for what they hope is a healthier climate, they discard the old attachments to property and place and put all their resources into searching the countryside so that they do not "leave behind a single human being" (256-57, 259). The growing nomadic community which coalesces around the narrator also abandons the hierarchical codes that privileged the attractive and able-bodied, the educated and entitled—the kind of idealized human that Rosemary Garland-Thomson and others have termed the "normate."⁴⁴ A "high-born beauty" discovers her appearance has become a curse in the lawless streets of London (250), and newly obsolete academics like Merrival, an astronomer once absorbed by his work, discover that erudition provides little comfort when uncomplemented by the presence of loved ones now gone forever (226, 237-38). Learning and book-reading lose their old valences in the new order: "To read were futile," Lionel reflects, "to write, vanity indeed"—a somber admission for one who had prided himself on being "wedded to literature" (240, 122). The death of a nurse cherished despite her "deficiencies of education and knowledge" delivers a devastating blow to Lionel's family (207), and child Clara's intelligence, sensibility, and beauty—noted appreciatively by her Uncle Lionel (179, 323)—prove far less valuable than her willingness to nurse and cheer the more despondent members of her family (240-41).

More highly valued than one's beauty, power of reason, lineage, or even experience, is one's very life. Lionel's band collects lives of all sorts as they move through the countryside: an abused and abandoned charity girl (260-61), a rapidly dying man who dances about dressed as a "Black Spectre" (318-19), a number of diseased indigents, and the assorted insane. They also

risk their own lives (and lose Idris's) attempting to emancipate Lionel's friend Lucy and her mobility-impaired mother, both of whom have been left behind by their migrating neighbors (273-74). The steadfast Lucy shares Lionel's high estimation of every last living being. She echoes his reflections on the fading distinction between the (now equally vulnerable) young and the elderly when she refuses to desert her mother, even though others "speak carelessly of her, because she is old and infirm, as if we must not all, if we are spared, become so" (250, 274). Lucy's mother dies before Lionel can effect a rescue, but his slowly moving company successfully cares for a number of similarly infirm individuals, refusing to abandon the sick and dying to anything except a lovingly carved grave (317, 323).

In the futuristic *Last Man*, Shelley envisions an inviting, if temporary, social space ready to enfold and accommodate those with physical and intellectual disabilities. Within her novel, civilization ceases to turn on discriminatory cycles of performance and evaluation, as Lionel suggests in his appropriation of a familiar, Shakespearean trope:

The earth, late wide circus for the display of dignified exploits, vast theatre for a magnificent drama, now presented a vacant space, an empty stage—for actor or spectator there was no longer aught to say or hear. (240)

Not without its troubling cultural consequences, this shift away from certain kinds of production also results in a new sort of freedom. Revisiting the conceit a bit later, Lionel claims a revolutionary freedom from delimiting acts of spectatorship: "now . . . on the empty stage, each might play his part without impediment from the other" (259). It is a new sort of social order that values life itself over such distinguishing and mappable features as beauty, erudition, physical strength, and mental stability. In this intimate community that privileges storytelling over reading, interdependence over autonomy, and *presence* over *power*, Mary Shelley has shaped an environment open to those dealing with any combination of cognitive, physical, and

physiognomic differences. If we read between the lines, we can just begin to recognize the outline of an idiot walking steadily alongside the clinically depressed Lionel, a slowly dying but resolute Adrian, and the disease-ravaged, mentally ill, and blind companions that form their close-knit troupe.

¹ Other such assessments include a complaint that her party encountered only one pretty woman during their entire travels—a grievance which implicitly denigrates the appearance of scores of women (*Six Weeks*’ 37)—and a tirade concerning some more un-washed, ill-figured fellow travelers which, again, equates appearance with essence: Shelley is repelled by the “horrid & slimy faces of our companions in voyage [sic]—our only wish was to absolutely annihilate [sic] such uncleanable animals . . . Twere easier for god to make entirely new men than attempt to purify such monsters as these . . .” (*Journals* 20-21). Similar prejudices emerge in Shelley’s nationalistic and classist observations. She is condescending towards different customs, disparaging some men in Germany who kiss upon parting (*Six Weeks*’ 36), and pitying a traveling man who knows only a little of many languages and not enough of her own (*Six Weeks*’ 39). She is also likely to appraise quickly a stranger’s intelligence, characterizing the peasants in Geneva as “slow and inapt” (however refined their manners) after a singular encounter with a girl who does not know the seasons (*Selected Letters* 16). Following the conventions of other travel writers, she revels in commentary of the “other” through her *History of a Six Week’s Tour*, touching on every variable from class, nation, and religion to cleanliness, manners, and beauty. This catalogue should not obscure, however, Shelley’s progressive tendencies which often reach beyond her era’s socio-political norms. Emily Sunstein’s rehabilitation of the author, *Mary Shelley: Romance and Reality* (1989), details the enlightening, formative influence of her famously liberal parents and their works, and relates such anecdotal evidence as Shelley’s unwillingness to eat sugar from a slave plantation (104), her abhorrence at the “English distance between ‘haughty’ mistress and ignorant servant” (119), and her befriending of a publicly castigated unwed mother (273).

² “Editions of [Lavater’s *Physiognomische Fragmente*] in English (1790-98), Dutch (1783f.), French (1782-1803), and other European languages are proof that this vogue soon spread beyond the German-speaking countries. On the other hand, the divinatory gift attributed to Lavater irritated more than a few critics who objected that its appeal left little room for rational doubt” (Siegrist 35).

³ Rivers argues that Marivaux and Gautier, French writers whose compositions temporally bookend Lavater’s work, both maintain such equivocal positions. Each “alternately asserts, thematizes, and questions the possibility of the body as signifier” (6).

⁴ It is useful at this point to distinguish among *physiognomy*, the reading of one’s character from his/her facial features; *phrenology*, which assumed that mappable cranial protuberances corresponded to similarly stable strengths and weaknesses of character; and *pathognomy*, the art of reading an individual’s current thoughts and emotions from their (shifting) facial expressions.

⁵ While aware of twenty-first century discourse’s preference for terms like “the disabled,” “the intellectually disabled,” or “individuals with developmental disability,” I will sometimes use the period-appropriate “idiot” for reasons of historical accuracy, while hoping that my example not perpetuate the literal, demeaning employment of the term to reference the intellectually disabled.

⁶ Andrews, 73-74. Jonathan Andrews discusses these opposing opinions and helps set Wordsworth firmly on one side of the fence by referencing an unpublished piece of Wordsworth's entitled "The Somersetshire Tragedy," in which the poet criticizes negative attitudes towards idiocy.

⁷ "Next to the consciousness of right and honour, God has shown that he loves best beauty and the sense of beauty, since he has endowed the visible universe so richly with the one, and made the other so keen and deep-seated an enjoyment in the hearts of his creatures." Mary Shelley, *Rambles in Germany and Italy in 1840, 1842, and 1843*, Vol. 8 of *The Novels and Selected Works of Mary Shelley*, gen. ed. Nora Crook, ed. Jeanne Moskal (1844; London: Pickering, 1996) 81.

⁸ "Idiocy can more accurately be said to refer to a range of human experiences and traits that are difficult to classify, ultimately deriving from neurological impairment, but often reflected in forms of asocial behavior that can be visually mimicked" (1).

⁹ The primary concern of this eminent psychologist and activist in *The Conquest of Mental Retardation* (1987) does not, however, involve highlighting those related issues of race, gender, and scientific progress that often occupy the modern critic. In what proved to be his last and most revered text, Blatt challenges common, prejudiced notions about persons with disabilities by taking a winding path through "history, biography, philosophy, morality, and ethics," a course that moves beyond the dry bed of fact and statistics to demand a concurrent examination of the kinds of cultural material which both inform and manifest a culture's "expressions of belief" (x).

¹⁰ Rosemary Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (New York: Columbia UP, 1997) 30-32.

¹¹ "And my point in this enquiry is to find whether there are any principles, on which the imagination is affected, so common to all, so grounded and certain, as to supply the means of reasoning satisfactorily about them" (Burke, 13). Also, while Burke asserts that proportion and deformity do not directly determine beauty and ugliness—a tantalizingly enlightened, egalitarian perspective—he quickly affirms that deformity inevitably, logically evokes disgust. Humanity cannot help reacting negatively, apparently, to deviations from the normal, the "complete, common form" (102). Burke also reifies the notion of *ugliness* as an appropriate aesthetic category, one he later associates with the sublime [footnotes to Part III, sections V and XXI]. Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, ed. J. T. Boulton (1757; London: Routledge, 1958).

¹² "The Physiognomical System of Doctors Gall and Spurzheim . . .", *Quarterly Review*. 8.15 (July 1815): 159-78.

¹³ Lavater's own ambiguity emerges in his claims that while everyone could read faces pathognomically, only a chosen few could be trained to read them physiognomically, "a secret that only he himself could reveal" (Shookman 7).

¹⁴ "The Greek Count George de Metaxa did her 'miniature' in French: 'These are the prettiest little ways, the prettiest little looks, the prettiest little figure . . . the prettiest little movements in the world . . . how prettily she expresses herself and if in conversation after some little story or joke in good taste or some kindness of hers, there is an opportunity to talk, feel or test her sensibility, her pretty eyes and all her person express it so well that one sees that her soul is in accord'" (Sunstein 208).

¹⁵ Audiologists point to the intense cognitive and emotional dissonance often caused by hearing loss. As demonstrated again in a recent study, difficulty understanding the spoken word can lead to "feelings of isolation, depression, loneliness, anger, fear, frustration, and disappointment" (Crandell 2-6). Losing one's hearing is a physically taxing change as well as an emotional one; the stress of aural difficulties has been linked with ischemic heart disease, hypertension, osteoarthritis, and various arrhythmias (Miller, Beltone Convention).

¹⁶ John Pauncefort Arrowsmith. "The Art of Instructing the Infant Deaf and Dumb." *Quarterly Review*. 26.52 (1822): 391-405.

¹⁷ Synecdoche "helps us to define an important component of physiognomy, the belief in an organizing, unifying principle of any human being evinced through any one of his members" (Rivers 86).

¹⁸ *Valperga* (1823) will take this tendency even further: character descriptions almost invariably begin by detailing eyes and then the rest of the face and form, followed by a description of those intangible character traits which, more often than not, congrue with appearance. Admittedly, the wife of Mathilda's father, Diana, almost appears an exception to this. The narrator argues repeatedly that her mother's beauty provided for her father but an added attraction, a quality secondary to her strong understanding and angelic disposition (7-9). The passion Mathilda's father later demonstrates for his child and the primacy he gives physical concerns over others undercuts this, however, calling into question the accuracy of the narrator's (Mathilda's) assessment of his character.

¹⁹ Jane Austen's characters more commonly wear such vague descriptors as "pretty," "handsome," "beautiful," or "plain" (*Pride* 1-4; *Northanger* 1). Occasionally, Austen's narrators provide more physical details and recount a character's preoccupations with appearance, but such attention to form most often finds itself immediately satirized by a narrator's free-indirect discourse (*Pride* 6, *Persuasion* 10).

²⁰ Shelley's text and that of her husband both balance significant usage of visual machinery with a few, heavily loaded, spoken words. For instance, *Matilda's* climax (an appropriately equivocal noun) occurs when Mathilda forces her father, despite his warnings of impending disaster, to finally put words to the many and varied looks he has been casting towards her: "'I demand that dreadful word; though it be as a flash of lightning to destroy me, speak it!'" When he does finally, briefly, articulate his sexual attraction to her, she falls to the ground and later, in the initial throes of detestable revelation, considers her father dead to her (201, 203). In P. B. Shelley's *The Cenci*, where gazing and countenance reading also play a

basic, structural role in the plot, the vocalization of incestuous passions again leads to destruction. Beatrice is troubled by her father's recent odd behavior, but it is not until he imparts "one little word" to the discomfiting "One look, one smile" that she feels trampled upon and diseased (2.1.63-73). When she is later raped by her father, for a time she cannot relate the traumatic event and her family must try to read the directed silences between her mad outpourings in order to determine her hurt. Finally finding voice to recount her ill fortune (though she still only implies, never labels, the crime, 3.1) is catalytic, leading eventually to parricide (Acts 3 and 4).

²¹ She does not, however, follow his privileging of lips and noses as especially accurate predictors of character, nor adopt the emphasis he gives to the mouth, chin, and cheeks (Wechsler 110-11).

²² Le Brun's programme involved capturing the "passions" in paint by reference to each emotion's manifestation on a shifting visage (Rivers 28-29).

²³ See *Valperga* for numerous examples of each.

²⁴ Shelley's varied usage of "lustre" reflects the ambiguity of the term itself. In one passage, "liquid luster" is the very quality that Mathilda wants quenched in her father's eyes, as indicative of the lust she now perceives and fears (30). Elsewhere, it is an attractive feature: Elinor's "deep blue eyes swam in a luster which could only be given by sensibility joined to wisdom" (49).

²⁵ Immured in depression brought on by recent events, Beatrice declares this idea, which proves to be a fundamental issue in Shelley's novel, with a series of striking metaphors:

““I was a poor, simple girl; but I have suffered much; and endurance, and bitter experience have let me into the truth of things; the deceitful veil which is cast over this world, is powerless to hide its deformity from me. I see the cruel heart, which lurks beneath the beautiful skin of the pard; I see the blight of autumn in the green leaves of spring, the wrinkles of age in the face of youth, rust on the burnished iron, storm in the very breast of calm, sorrow in the heart of joy; all beauty wraps deformity, as the fruit the kernel; Time opens the shell, the seed is poison.”” (332)

²⁶ Until the novel's end, that is. Castruccio's beauty may be able to defeat the laws of physiognomy for a time and cover his growing depravity with his distractingly beautiful face, but even his features, in the end, shape themselves to match the new temperament he has carved for himself. At age thirty-three:

his character was formed; and his physiognomy, changed from its youthful expression, had [finally] become impressed by his habitual feelings . . . the strong emotions to which he was subject, had left their mark on his countenance; his eye had grown hollow . . . his brow was

diminished by lines, which . . . shewed that those passions whose outward signs he suppressed, yet preyed upon the vital principle; his eyes had not lost their fire, but their softness was gone. (391)

²⁷ Comparisons were frequently drawn between "idiots" and animals in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; education of the intellectually disabled was seen by some as offering a possible transformation from a kind of bestial state into real humanity (Rix 162).

²⁸ This second phrase, "monstrous image," appears in the 1831 edition of the novel, not the original 1818 edition.

²⁹ "If the male gaze makes the normative female a sexual spectacle, then the stare sculpts the disabled subject into a grotesque spectacle. The stare is the gaze intensified . . ." (*Extraordinary* 26).

³⁰ "Review of *Frankenstein; or the Modern Prometheus*," *Quarterly Review* 18 (January 1818): 379-85.

³¹ Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (1979; New Haven: Yale UP, 2000) chapter 7, "Horror's Twin: Mary Shelley's Monstrous Eve"

³² Anne K. Mellor, *Mary Shelley: Her Life, Her Fiction, Her Monsters* (New York: Methuen, 1988) 43. Emily W. Sunstein, *Mary Shelley: Romance and Reality* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1989) 131.

³³ Maurice Hindle, one of the novel's modern admirers, claims that Shelley's first novel provokes her readers to rethink their instinctive, appearance-based reactions to others (Introduction, xxxii). See Maurice Hindle, Introduction to *Frankenstein* (New York: Penguin, 1992) vii-xliii.

³⁴ *The Conquest of Mental Retardation*, 304.

³⁵ David Wright explains this distinction between perceptive and comprehensive abilities in "The Certification of Insanity in Nineteenth-Century England and Wales" (285-86).

³⁶ "The author supposes that his hero has the power of communicating *life* to dead matter: but what has the vital principle to do with *habits*, and actions which are dependent on the moral will? If *Frankenstein* could have endowed his creature with the vital principle of a hundred or a thousand human beings, it would no more have been able to *walk* without having previously acquired *the habit* of doing so, than it would be to talk, or to reason, or to judge." "Review of *Frankenstein; or the Modern Prometheus*." *The Literary Panorama and National Register*, n.s., 8 (1 June 1818): 411-14.

³⁷ Morison, 223, 245.

³⁸ See Jonathan Andrews for a brief discussion of the shift in medical expectations concerning the educability of the idiot, a shift that occurred around the end of the eighteenth century (67). Also, as Sir Brian Rix points out, "The 19th century saw the first provision for the education and care of mentally handicapped people. Early educationists assumed that all 'idiots' were capable of some improvement, even if they could not be cured" (161).

³⁹ Blatt writes that intellectually disabled people are "prone to the conditions that can lead to the creation of 'monsters,'" monsters to others but even more to themselves (298).

⁴⁰ The second reference here is to a passage present only in the 1831 edition: "It had been her care which provided me a companion in Clerval—and yet a man is blind to a thousand minute circumstances, which call forth a woman's sedulous attention" (Pickering endnotes 219).

⁴¹ *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 214.

⁴² Letter to Sir Walter Scott, 14 June 1818. *Selected Letters*, 34

⁴³ Just as *Frankenstein* likely signals Mary Shelley's grief over the death of her infant children, *The Last Man* engages another series of personal losses. Mary Shelley's niece, Allegra, had died in 1822, her husband had been killed in a boating accident three months later, and prolonged illness had taken the life of family friend Lord Byron in 1824.

⁴⁴ *Extraordinary Bodies*, 8. Also, that Mary Shelley does not erase *all* sense of position—the well-bred and nobly born Adrian, for instance, does prove himself the most able leader for what one companion envisions as a "*patriarchal* brotherhood of love" (326, my emphasis)—should not discredit her obvious efforts to shape a remarkably egalitarian society.

Chapter Three

From Caricature to Character:

The Intellectually Disabled Across Dickens's Novels

Yet the reliance upon disability in narrative rarely develops into a means of identifying people with disabilities as a disenfranchised cultural constituency. The ascription of absolute singularity to disability performs a contradictory operation: a character 'stands out' as a result of an attributed blemish, but this exceptionality divorces him or her from a shared social identity. (Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis* 55)

David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder's primary complaint in *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* (2000) is that Victorian and early modern literatures habitually spin disability into a spectacle, into a flashing sign or symbol meant to attract attention to something other than itself. Fictional disability often functions as a crutch or *prosthesis* upon which characterization, plot, theme, and tone may lean, little attention being drawn to the larger disabled population represented by the single, imaginary example. The physically disabled character's very distinctiveness can lead not only to isolation from those other fictional characters who react with distancing pity or disgust, but to a kind of representational disconnect from those real-world individuals with disabilities whose numbers—if recognized within the boundary of the novel or short story—would strip the character's exceptional disability of its rhetorical power. Mitchell and Snyder suggest that Victorian literature is highly dependent upon such "static languages," that it predicates itself on predictably "sterile" and delimiting formulae of narrative-making (142). The question of

whether this generalization can be justly applied to the work of one of Victorian England's most prolific writers provides the impetus for this chapter.

Charles Dickens seems an intuitive choice for literary defender of the intellectually disabled, a manifestly humanitarian author likely to carve out in his fiction that welcoming, inclusive space so wanting in a Victorian milieu increasingly preoccupied with education, industry, and self-reliance. Dickens's first three novels bespeak a ready advocate for victims of many kinds of social injustice. *The Pickwick Papers* (1836-37), *Oliver Twist* (1837-39), and *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838-39) together establish what will become life-long, very loud sympathies for the destitute, the orphaned, the poorly educated, and the imprisoned debtor. Like his friend and collaborator Wilkie Collins, Dickens also manifests an enduring interest in the physically disabled, especially those whose vision impairment, faulty hearing, mobility difficulties, or visible disfigurement are compounded by class inequities and poverty.¹ Intellectually disabled characters provide an even more severe indictment of Dickens's society: the author ties the origins of figures like Smike, Mr. Dick, and Maggy right back to contemporary medical, educational, and social problems.

And yet, while Dickens often appears sympathetic to the plight of these various groups, his body of work complicates any attempt to cast him as a consistent progressive. As Peter Akroyd notes in his biography of Dickens, the novelist "was a radical by instinct rather than by ideology," a disjunction which results in curiously disparate approaches to the same oppressed populations as one moves from novel to novel (137). Dickens's representations of the intellectually deficient are, like his renderings of the physically disabled, tonally complex and, occasionally, ethically suspect. Only gradually does the maturing author move from old stereotypes that operate in traditionally limiting—often internally inconsistent—ways, towards

more stable and three-dimensional configurations of the idiot and imbecile. Notably, as these disabled figures grow more nuanced and less bound to one-dimensional role-plays that functionally ostracize them from their peers, they also become both more peripheral to the plot and more easily absorbed into the communities of their respective novels.

Dickens's fiction provides disability studies with plenty of fertile ground in which to cultivate its *embodied* concerns, particularly as the popular Victorian novelist seems to move mischievously back and forth between what modern sensibilities would consider politically assailable and more politically correct portraitures. His steady attention to corporeal difference can manifest itself in a gothic fascination with grotesquerie, concentrated compassion towards a visibly disadvantaged social group, or an even-handed approach that considers the disabled as in no intrinsic way different from anyone else. His books in the late 30's and early 40's, for instance, often rely on old pseudo-philosophical equations linking physical appearance or disability with a surplus of either virtue or vice. Dickens deploys egregiously physiognomic formulae to forecast the malevolence of both schoolmaster Wackford Squeers of *Nicholas Nickleby* and Daniel Quilp of *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1840-41), giving the former a suspiciously solitary eye and the latter the stunted stature of a classically villainous dwarf. He builds the temperaments of the crippled Tiny Tim and *Nicholas Nickleby*'s partially paralytic Newman Noggs atop an equally simplistic, albeit conversely figured foundation, awarding both disabled heroes intensely virtuous, altruistic sensibilities. Elsewhere, Dickens interrogates all such simplistic character formulae. Towards the end of *Our Mutual Friend* (1864-65), for instance, he allows the mobility impaired Jenny Wren to display a vindictive streak, a surprise in one hitherto constructed as routinely compassionate. In similar fashion, the blind and poor Stagg of *Barnaby Rudge* (1841), a greedy companion of Barnaby Rudge's murderous father, is allowed

to debunk outright the facile equation Dickens appears to rely on elsewhere—that a disabling condition somehow, necessarily generates moral character.²

Few critics have yet begun to excavate Dickens's configurations of *intellectual* disability, let alone bring them into the light of social psychology. Dickens scholars may praise the author's genius in creating such comically naïve characters as the bumbling spendthrift Mr. Micawber and the child-like Harold Skimpole, but they seem comparatively uninterested in those other secondary characters with more profound intellectual deficiencies. Contemporary critics who do venture into such territory tend to read intellectually disabled characters in metaphorical or mechanical ways. Critics like Patricia Pucinelli treat the "idiots" of American novels as mere plot devices enacting the predictable, limited roles prescribed by literary tradition, such as the moral yardstick against which other characters are measured, or the reliable plot catalyst.³ Others, including Martin Halliwell, cast literary idiots and imbeciles as endlessly multivalent, ultimately unmappable sites containing all manner of symbolic associations.⁴ Few, however, consider characters like Smike, Barnaby Rudge, Mr. Dick, Maggy, and Sloppy in terms of successful or failed mimesis, as representations of an actual, disabled population in uneasy dialogue with society.

Dickens's constructions of intellectual disability actually cover as broad a range as his portrayals of physical difference. Early figures like Smike and Barnaby slip easily into the snug garments laid out by convention, playing synthetic, perfunctory roles that disqualify them from full participation in their respective communities. Later characters like Mr. Dick and—to an even greater degree—Maggy and Sloppy, largely avoid such typecasting. While it would be difficult to demonstrate a strictly linear progression from functional caricature towards more nuanced characterization across Dickens's collected works, his increasingly empowering

portraits of the intellectually disabled do suggest a writer more and more attuned to the social and intellectual prejudices working against this population. In her recent *Fictions of Affliction: Physical Disability in Victorian Culture* (2004), Martha Stoddard Holmes suggests that such a maturation process informs Dickens's rendering of physically disabled characters as he invests successive disabled female characters with growing sexual and relational power.⁵ My discussion here tracks a similar pattern, using close readings to map a path from those principal characters in the 1830s and 40s whose intellectual disability compels them to serve predictably limited functions, towards those later, peripheral characters who somehow evidence greater practical and relational agency than their more visible antecedents. This mapping process will not preoccupy itself with nosologies, with hasty attempts to lay contemporary medical and legal distinctions atop Dickens's changing constructions of intellectual disability. Forcibly employing such diagnostic signposts would over-simplify our investigation of Dickens's work, preempting closer consideration of both those earlier narratological strategies that seem to have demanded ultra-flexible characterizations of imbecility, and those more stable and socially viable configurations which followed in the 50s and 60s. Determining, for instance, that *Barnaby Rudge* resembles imperfectly and inconsistently the figure of an "idiot," that Maggy's behavior and language are faithfully "imbecilic," and that the (anachronistic) category of "feeble-minded" best describes young Sloppy would provide a convenient but incomplete picture of Dickens's changing practice over time.⁶ At least as important as the growing technical accuracy and internal consistency of his sequential portrayals of intellectual disability are the rhetorical and ideological means serviced by these characters within the socio-imaginary bound by each of Dickens's novels.

Smike Nickleby: A Pitiful Case

Mr. Dick and Barnaby Rudge may constitute the two “most prominent” examples of the Dickensian natural fool (Schmidt 93), but Nicholas Nickleby’s closely orbiting satellite, Smike, is without a doubt Dickens’s best-known simpleton. *Nicholas Nickleby* remains one of Dickens’s most popular novels to this day, an admiration demonstrated most recently by two very able film adaptations released in the last four years.⁷ The friendship between the morally expert, hard-working Nicholas and the crippled, emotionally debilitated, and intellectually compromised Smike constitutes the most compelling relationship in a narrative replete with romances, antagonisms, and comic entanglements. While their friendship’s unabashedly maudlin texture accounts in part for its attraction, this pairing so beloved by the public deserves further analysis, its recognizable sentiment belying Dickens’s curiously complicated depiction of Smike and his disability. For example, while Dickens roots Smike’s weak intellect in the toxic soil of Wackford Squeers’s Yorkshire school—the boy’s deficiency is clearly the result of the “care” provided by Wackford and his wife—Dickens simultaneously configures Smike’s impediments as insurmountable in the same way that *congenital* idiocy limits mental improvement. Likewise, the tonal quality of Dickens’s characterization shifts vertiginously. At moments Smike seems accepted by his community, at others, sidelined and removed. Smike alternately assumes the roles of pathetic victim, courageous runaway, slapstick theatre entertainer, sad romantic, and terminally ill invalid, a fluidity of function that limits more than it enables. While humorous encounters with Vincent Crummles and Mrs. Nickleby leaven the melancholy atmosphere that hangs about Smike, the air he breathes remains thick with his neighbors’ pitying exhalations. Ultimately, this pity brings a new kind of isolation, then death—the very act of condescending kindness effectively divides and separates, removing

Smikey from the close-knit band into which he has ventured. In the final analysis, the reader's fondness for Smikey cannot rescue the character from the partition prescribed for him well *outside* community—a bounded, remote space akin to that relegated the idiot by Victorian society and an older, well-established literary tradition.

Smikey appears first as but one of a horde of degraded products turned out by Squeers's educational machine. The squalid environment of Dotheboys Hall stunts the intellectual and physical development of all its young denizens, the desperate spectacle of which stuns Nicholas when he first steps into the boys' classroom:

Pale and haggard faces, lank and bony figures, children with the countenances of old men, deformities with irons upon their limbs, boys of stunted growth, and others whose long meager legs would hardly bear their stooping bodies, all crowded on the view together; there were the bleared eye, the hare-lip, the crooked foot, and every ugliness or distortion that told of unnatural aversion conceived by parents for their offsprings . . . (97)

Smikey himself lacks the conspicuous physiognomy of some malformed peers, but his partial lameness and that haggard countenance so fancied by theatre-master Crummles do mark him as the archetypal, much to be pitied, victim. In a depraved society where “the world [rolls] on from year to year, alike careless and indifferent” to frequent examples of “injustice, and misery, and wrong,” Smikey serves as one of many inevitable, irrefutable results of society's sins (653).

Smikey's defects, then, result not from the hereditary or gestational conditions usually implicated in developmental disability, but from the abuse that follows abandonment. Smikey's delicate health and damaged frame are the direct result of “brutality and hard usage” at the hands of Mr. Squeers; even the soft-spoken and sanguine Nicholas recognizes in Smikey the “wreck” of a human being, blaming his condition on years of ill-treatment in a most “loathsome den” (247, 557). Dotheboys Hall not only constricts the young imaginations of its students—in a fashion

that anticipates Mr. Gradgrind's utilitarian school in *Hard Times* (1854)—it squeezes out any hopes of better treatment and effectively squashes the boys' dreams of being one day reclaimed by friends or family. The hazardous domiciliary of Dotheboys cramps Smike's natural growth, misshaping his body and mind into a mockery of what they would have otherwise become. Smike's guardians, that is, *create* his slowness, despite Ralph Nickelby's claims to the contrary. Still unaware of their kinship, Smike's wealthy father labels the boy an "imbecile" (562) and claims Smike has been "of weak and imperfect intellect" from birth (557). The evidence, however, contravenes this assertion. Just days before Smike escapes from Dotheboys, the villainous Mrs. Squeers herself comments on Smike's mental degeneration, noting to her husband that Smike appears to be "turning silly" (90). Predictably, neither she nor her husband trace the boy's condition back to their own faulty care, tender mercies which also appear to have compromised Smike's memory. After years of living anxiously in the present to avoid the punishments that presumably followed slowing down to reflect, Smike has lost the ability to retain substantial chunks of information. Smike demonstrates the degree to which his once strong memory has faded by forgetting, mere hours after meeting Nicholas, whether his new friend was living at Dotheboys when a fellow student died (267, 106). When fate brings the escaped Smike across Squeers's path in London, the headmaster is implicated yet again in Smike's enervated state. The narrator explains that "such mental faculties as the poor fellow possessed . . . utterly deserted him," that the boy freezes, "stunned and stupefied" (472-73). Smike's reaction denotes a pathological learned helplessness, an inability—now and during Browdie's rescue attempt hours later—to recognize his agency in the face of Squeers's intimidating will (481-82). "Stupefied" in the above passage also reiterates a second, more serious and lasting consequence of Squeers's attentions. Smike has not only been crippled, but

has been literally *made stupid* by “rigour and cruelty in childhood . . . years of misery and suffering lightened by no ray of hope,” resulting in the current “night of intellect” (476). That Dickens intends the benighted Smike to function at least in part as an imbecile or simpleton is underscored by Hablot K. Browne’s (Phiz’s) accompanying illustrations; one illustration in chapter twenty-five depicts an ungainly, stringy-haired Smike with goggle-eyes and open mouth (Appendix B).

On the other hand, Smike cannot be simply classed as a paradigmatic intellectual degenerate. The narrator’s description of him as a “half-witted creature” (105) testifies, perhaps *unwittingly*, to the complexity—even inconsistency—of Smike’s portrayal. He is indeed a half-wit, but more in the sense that he demonstrates a normal wit only half the time than that he sports only a fraction of a normal person’s intuition and cognitive powers. At moments, Smike appears uncannily perceptive, his language becomes unusually eloquent, and he demonstrates a mature and noble willingness to sacrifice himself to defend his protector. Like one of Shakespeare’s court fools, Smike often sees to the heart of the matter. He recognizes Nicholas’s increasing paleness, thinness, and financial concerns despite the latter’s attempts to hide the truth, and, notwithstanding his eloquently stated desire to “go with [Nicholas] – anywhere – everywhere – to the world’s end – to the churchyard grave,” considers abandoning his friend to spare him the burden of providing for a fellow traveler (162, 251). Recaptured by Squeers, Smike demonstrates the real seriousness of his commitment to Nicholas’s well-being, preferring to resume the old psychological and physical suffering than betray to Squeers anything that could compromise his new benefactor. But then, before the reader can grow accustomed to the new and improved, rational and heroic Smike, Dickens complicates his character once more. In this

particular situation, the narrator undermines Smike's courage immediately upon describing it with all possible pathos:

a confused and perplexed idea that his benefactor might have committed some terrible crime in bringing him away, which would render him liable to heavy punishment if detected, had contributed in some degree to reduce him to his present state of apathy and terror . . . Such were the thoughts – if to visions so imperfect and undefined as those which wandered through his enfeebled brain, the term can be applied – which were present to the mind of Smike, and rendered him deaf alike to intimidation and persuasion . . . (475)

Dickens appears unable, or unwilling, to present a coherent portrait of Smike's mental faculties. Here, the narrator prevents unequivocal praise of Smike's heroic intentions by mixing proof of his valor with doubt about whether the boy's scattered "thoughts" are even worth the name. Other inconsistencies emerge if one considers the former evidence of Smike's faulty memory in conjunction with his surprising ability to navigate London's winding streets, not only those walked multiple times with Nicholas, but those he has never traversed except in a state of panic (471, 483-85). Smike's ability to acquire new knowledge and skills appears similarly irregular. Though he successfully learns a number of lines for his role as apothecary in Crummle's production of *Romeo and Juliet*, elsewhere he "[pores] hard over a book," "vainly endeavouring to master some task which a child of nine years old, possessed of ordinary powers, could have conquered with ease" (318, 148).

The different degrees of support offered by Nicholas during these last two crises help explain Smike's varying levels of success to a point, but they also indicate the tale's ambivalent relationship with Smike. When the young man tearfully informs Nicholas that he cannot complete the earlier reading task, Nicholas successfully discourages Smike from further attempts, claiming "in an agitated voice; 'I cannot bear to see you'" (148). Smike's later attempt to memorize lines for a play that will provide living expenses for them both bumps up against

similar obstacles, but this time Nicholas jumps at the opportunity to help Smike and, bit by bit, helps him negotiate the challenge before him. Such apparently incongruous moments provoke a number of questions: to what degree does Nicholas consider Smike a charity project and to what degree a true confidant and friend? Are Smike's intellectual deficiencies insurmountable or not? If not, what kind of environment does Smike's improvement require? Dickens's changing portrayal of Smike's intellect might be defensible as a narratological strategy that underdetermines Smike's limits to keep the audience guessing as to his final destiny, or perhaps as a more socially minded tactic to disrupt the readerly impulse to pigeon-hole the intellect of and thus prescribe the proper place for Smike (and those real people like him). The problem, from a cultural studies perspective concerned with how fictional mimesis both reflects and shapes societal forms, is that Smike's unrealistically variable nature prevents his full assimilation into Nicholas's family and, arguably, paves the way for both his removal from the tale's central community and his subsequent death.

The argument that any inconsistencies in Smike's intellectual abilities can be accounted for by laying a developmental map over his narrative, by seeing in him "a personality developing through self-realisation" does not rightly consider Smike's final, fatal situation, nor his friends' responses to it (Ball 125). His falling in love with Kate Nickleby may demonstrate his humanity and sensitivity (Ball 128), but it simultaneously highlights the emotional and social gap between him and those closest to him. This gap serves as more than another example of Smike's failed self-confidence: we receive no indication whatsoever that such a love relationship *could* have ever been, even if Smike had made visible overtures to Kate. We know Kate belongs with Frank Cheerbyl from the moment the two enter the same space. And though Smike begins to fail

rapidly after meeting the beautiful Kate and subsequently becoming “‘more conscious of his weak intellect’” (463), no one—including Nicholas—ever considers that the onset of “rapid consumption” (687) might have anything to do with unexpressed, unrequited affections. Even Newman Noggs, who notices Smike tear up while listening to Noggs enumerate Kate’s many virtues, fails to discover the truth (486-87). Smike just does not count as a card-carrying member of this romantically inclined community which, in the comedy’s conclusion, will plump itself with a number of happy marriages. He must instead be eliminated and the reader made to feel that such a removal is not only appropriately touching, but necessary. In an effort to comfort the bereaved Nicholas upon Smike’s death, the congenial businessman Charles Cheerbyle expresses an eerily pat formula for comfort:

“we must not be cast down, no, no. We must learn to bear misfortune, and we must remember that there are many sources of consolation even in death. Every day that this poor lad had lived, he must have been less and less qualified for the world, and more unhappy in his own deficiencies. It is better as it is, my dear sir. Yes, yes, yes, it’s better as it is.” (746)

Though well-meaning in intention, and appropriately pathetic for the sentimental scene Dickens means to paint here, these encouraging words blantly counter what the careful reader already knows about Smike to this point. It is surely strange to hear Nicholas agreeing with Cheerbyle’s sentiment: “‘I have thought of all that sir,’ replied Nicholas, clearing his throat. ‘I feel it, I assure you’” (746).

Pleasantries aside, why would Nicholas agree with Cheerbyle’s assessment of Smike’s potential? Would it not have been consistent with Nicholas’s character and previous altruism to have offered Smike a home with himself and his new bride if his friend had lived? He promised Smike such a future and introduced his friend to his own family with this goal in mind (359, 422). Would the network of friends Smike obtained in recent months have mysteriously

discontinued their support of his ongoing development? He had learned the acting profession readily enough under Nicholas's tutelage, and had quickly proven himself indispensable to Mrs. Nickleby as an attentive, sympathetic listener (426). Given the social and developmental progress made thus far, would he really have grown increasingly "less qualified" and "unhappy in his own deficiencies" if he had recovered from his illness? The above exchange between Nicholas and his new employer serves as more than a moment of socially appropriate consolation—Cheerbyle is a bit *too* cheery here. His words erode the novel's central relationship, upending the notion of an incremental progression on Smike's part, and erasing any mistaken assumptions of (a shared) reciprocity by throwing into greater relief the lop-sided nature of Smike and Nicholas's friendship. Nicholas might well remember the dying Smike as "the partner of his poverty, and the sharer of his better fortune" (715), but Smike alive and well never gave as much as he took.

Smike had hoped the balance might swing in the other direction. He had wished to be Nicholas's "faithful hard-working servant," taking only the comfort of Nicholas's presence as payment (162). Nicholas himself had called for a more egalitarian relationship: "the world shall deal by you as it does by me . . ." (162). In practice, however, conditions always favored Smike's status as sole *receiver* of goods and services. The profoundly virtuous Nicholas taught Smike to pray (535), got him an acting job on the merits of Nicholas's own promising looks and abilities, and provided Smike—if briefly—with the surrogate family he desired. During one difficult period, and in an attempt to make Smike feel his worth, Nicholas had claimed that through all their difficulties Smike remained his "only comfort and stay," adding the seemingly innocuous appendage, "The thought of you has upheld me through all I have endured today" (251). This gentle endearment actually, inadvertently betrayed Smike's primary function in

Nicholas's daily life—that of a needy dependent, the *primum mobile* for Nicholas's attempts to establish a dependable livelihood. Smike may have consistently considered ways to please Nicholas (267), but Nicholas was the one whose acting skills and business acumen supported the two. Smike rarely did anything beyond getting himself in situations necessitating Nicholas's intervention. He was also the one who ultimately—in his fatal illness—had required the other's unremitting attention and care (711). Nicholas compassionated Smike with each new fit of depression that came upon him, encouraging his friend to be open with his feelings, but Smike never gained the same easy access to Nicholas's own innermost workings. When Smike unearthed Nicholas's distress after the latter had finished writing Noggs for an account of Kate and Mrs. Nickleby, for instance, Nicholas denied his melancholy “with assumed gaiety,” afraid “the confession would have made the boy miserable all night” (359). Nicholas consciously, though not maliciously, retained emotional control over their relationship, insuring that he would never himself become the object of pity he preferred locating in Smike.

Ultimately, the sad spectacle of Smike earns the reader's condescension in the same way it does Nicholas's own. We indulgently relate to the attractive hero who strives and overcomes, but watch Smike with an estranging pity that pets without embracing him. Dickens encourages such distance by diminishing Smike's agency to almost nothing and providing the reader virtually no point of identification with one who seems made to suffer and die. In retrospect, Dickens rationalizes Smike's final removal by having made it seem inevitable all along. With the possible exception of his heavily applauded, proud moments on the theatrical stage (318), Smike does not act upon anyone in a way that could help form a *mutually* beneficial relationship. When not provided for as a dependent, the wretch is acted upon as a most helpless victim. As mentioned earlier, Squeers plays the role of primary scourge, wreaking on Smike “the vilest and

most degrading cruelty,” dressing the nineteen-year-old in a child’s clothes barely “wide enough for his attenuated frame,” habitually working his “student” to the point of exhaustion, and withholding sleep (90). Verbal and physical abuse compound hard manual labor, practices Squeers accelerates when he notices Nicholas’s kindness to Smike. Such a confiding connection as that shared by these two fast friends has been long in coming: Smike has for years looked through incoming letters for evidence of the parents who abandoned him in childhood, and has long feared dying without any intimate ties to the rest of humanity (89, 106). The boy, that is, ranks at least as high on the scale of sentimentality as does Tiny Tim. At times Smike’s pain does provoke laughter, as when the theatre manager appraises his emaciated countenance and body as perfect for “an actor in the starved business” (275), or when Smike learns more quickly than his lines the notion that his character must appear extremely hungry “which – perhaps from old recollections – he had acquired with great aptitude” (318). Such sugared comedy, however, coats a hard, bitter core. These wonderful flashes of comic relief, which also include Mrs. Nickleby’s repeatedly mistaking his name as “Mr. Slammons,” ultimately do little to brighten Dickens’s bleak portrait of this intellectually disadvantaged character (426). Smike dies as he has lived, a helpless young man supported by a strong and reliable friend—one towards whom he pathetically directs the last of his dwindling energies:

At first, Smike was strong enough to walk about for short distances at a time, with no other support or aid than that which Nicholas could afford him. At this time, nothing appeared to interest him so much as visiting those places which had been most familiar to his friend in bygone days. (711)

The kind of vicarious identification with the Nicklebys evidenced during Smike’s final days, together with his desire to be buried near Nicholas’s father and have a locket of Kate’s hair secreted in his coffin, continues to mark him as an outsider desperately looking in. Nicholas’s

family—including the class-conscious Mrs. Nickleby—proves too kind and caring to reject Smike, but he never enters completely into their circle. The novel’s closing illustration of the heroes placing garlands on their cousin’s grave (the family connection comes to light too late to gratify Smike), their infant children playing about the site and listening to softly spoken tales of Smike’s life and times (777), neatly captures his status while alive (Appendix C). He was always more a catalyst for compassionate acts and words than a vital, necessary member of the Nickleby family.

Barnaby Rudge: Erstwhile Idiot and Plot Catalyst

Smike is a Dickensian idiot whose dual roles produce an unsustainable character situation, a social problematic the resolution of which requires extreme measures by the author. Barnaby Rudge is another. In Smike’s case, apparently insurmountable intellectual and social debilities prevent expression of those emotional desires Dickens has allowed him to develop, creating a disconcerting portrait of unrequited affection. Smike has an idiot’s intellectual powers but a normal person’s sensibilities. The only “logical” course left to him, once he realizes the impossibility of successfully wooing the kind and beautiful Kate, is self-termination, a path his already weakened body obligingly effects for him. Barnaby Rudge’s own stereotypical role as naïve plot mechanism, like Smike’s position as pitiable dependent, cannot be prolonged indefinitely either. As Dickens wishes, however, to pull this second idiot figure back into the communal fold (from which Barnaby will unwittingly take his leave mid-story), he decides to *alter* instead of eliminating him . . .

“God be with you through the night, dear boy! God be with you!”
She tore herself away, and in a few seconds Barnaby was alone.
He stood for a long time rooted to the spot, with his face hidden
in his hands; then flung himself, sobbing, upon his miserable bed.

But the moon came slowly up in all her gentle glory, and the stars looked out . . . looked down in sorrow on the sufferings and evil deeds of men; and [Barnaby] felt its peace sink deep into his heart. He, a poor idiot, caged in his narrow cell, was as much lifted up to God, while gazing on that mild light, as the freest and most favoured man in all the spacious city; and in his ill-remembered prayer, and in the fragment of the childish hymn, with which he sung and crooned himself asleep, there breathed as true a spirit as ever studied homily expressed, or old cathedral arches echoed. (609)

This melodramatic portrait corrals into one frame a number of variables important in understanding Dickens's shifting construction of the central figure in his critically neglected *Barnaby Rudge: A Tale of the Riots of 'Eighty*. As this passage suggests, Barnaby consistently wears the label "idiot," affixed to him here by the narrator and elsewhere by a host of other characters. He also plays a number of stereotypical roles ascribed to the idiot by literary tradition, including that of a *natural* more attuned than others to the heavens above and earth's creatures below, as well as a moral yardstick against which the "evil deeds of men" can be measured. Unlike the intellectually deficient protagonist of Dickens's third novel, that of his fifth boasts strong ties to community and family, evidenced here in the sorrow shared by an imprisoned boy-man of twenty-seven years and his anxious mother. These assorted factors would seem to relegate Barnaby to a relatively static imaginative space, one bound and secured by communal protections and predetermined narrative expectations for the idiot figure. Curiously, however, Dickens's characterization of Barnaby changes significantly as the tale moves towards an ending that will rescue and reincorporate the misled and bewildered protagonist.

Instead of requiring Barnaby's removal from the stage on which romantic unions and joyful births will bow when the curtain falls, this comedy ultimately calls for a new and improved Barnaby to step forward and join in the festival of renewed associations. Dickens has

effected this kind of makeover before: as Angus Easson points out, Dickens transforms young Kit of *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1804-41) from the “near-idiot” he appears at the book’s opening into a literate hero “of sterling character” by its end.⁸ In the previously quoted scene from chapter seventy-three, Barnaby’s surprisingly normal emotional response to his serious situation already suggests a dramatically improved cognizance of consequences. His newly enhanced acumen accompanies a corresponding rise in spiritual status: once lamented for lacking a soul, a want “far more terrible in a living man than in a dead one” (35), Barnaby now prays with “as true a spirit as ever studied homily expressed.” In other words, Dickens’s desire to reclaim his titular hero requires stripping him of those “idiotic” faculties which had *destabilized* various communities over the course of the novel. Dickens slowly erases the young man’s naïveté and improves his intellect, memory, and discernment so that when Barnaby does return to his friends in the final pages, that troublesome ignorance which recently disrupted London society no longer exists to jeopardize this more intimate circle. And yet, at the same time that Barnaby undergoes this gradual change into one of “better memory and greater steadiness of purpose” (688), Dickens retains the period terminology (“idiot” and the more inclusive term “mad”) that works to delimit Barnaby’s potential, and continues to assign him roles suggested by literary convention.⁹ The result is a highly protean, ultimately untenable portrayal of intellectual disability.

Barnaby shares with Smike the unenviable status of “poor boy,” an easy target for objectifying pity (215, 471). Once again, the distressing origins of the idiot figure’s condition lie well outside his control, in this case linked back to evil wrought on the child around the time of his birth via Dickens’s employment of popular superstition. A double-homicide committed by his father and discovered by his horrified mother places a blot in the shape of “a smear of blood

but half washed out” (50) acrosss the unborn Barnaby’s wrist, thereby enacting the popular formula of *maternal impression* whereby shocking incidents witnessed by a pregnant woman transferred themselves onto the developing fetus. The birthmark serves as an outward sign of both Mr. Rudge’s crime and the disability that offense stamps onto Barnaby’s brain. Mysticism thus replaces physical abuse as the agent of affliction, effecting a quasi-Biblical transference of the father’s sin onto the unborn child.¹⁰ The nature of this curse, identified repeatedly by the narrator and long recognized by Mrs. Rudge (209, 611, 612), eventually confronts Barnaby (609) and even the morally insensate Mr. Rudge. Horrified, the hero’s father realizes that his own crime has been inscribed onto his son, one who quickly becomes to him

a torture and reproach; in his wild eyes, there were terrible images of that guilty night; with his unearthly aspect, and his half-formed mind, he seemed to the murderer a creature who had sprung into existence from his victim’s blood. (574)

In Dickens’s sentimental world, Barnaby’s ills demand a sympathetic response from those around him, a prescription Mr. Rudge declines when he refuses to confess either to earthly or heavenly authorities his culpability in *creating* those ills, a refusal which doubles as a rejection of that path to salvation articulated by his estranged wife (611).

Despite the metaphysical curse tainting his mind and body, Barnaby remains the idiotic *innocent* for the first half of the novel, playing the predictable role of naïve natural at one with chaste Nature, and remaining unaware of society’s scheming. Barnaby’s absence from the main action usually indicates a carefree jaunt through the countryside with Grip, his pet raven, or perhaps some recently befriended dogs (371). When the threats and greed of Barnaby’s spectral father prompt Mrs. Rudge to fly London for a distant countryside, Barnaby adjusts quickly, enjoying the new ease with which he can indulge in daylong adventures:

Barnaby’s enjoyments were, to walk, and run, and leap, till he was

tired; then to lie down in the long grass . . . There were wild-flowers to pluck . . . There were birds to watch; fish; ants . . . millions of living things to have an interest in, and lie in wait for, and clap hands and shout in memory of, when they had disappeared. In default of these . . . there was the merry sunlight to hunt out . . . there was slumber in the midst of all these soft delights, with the gentle wind murmuring like music in his ears, and everything around melting into one delicious dream. (372)

This perambulating impulse has long made Barnaby the perfect message carrier, “as much to be trusted as the post itself” (91), though his mind too tends to wander—just one symptom of that wildly associative imagination that can get him into trouble when he abandons the lonesome roads for communion with his fellows. His child-like conclusion that the “merry sunlight” betokens a reliable source of currency, for instance, seems innocuous enough when shared with only his mother. Though she does worry about Barnaby’s fiscal fancies (in light of his father’s murderous avarice), her son’s conclusion that the sun deposits gold on the ground sparks only harmless attempts to search out those elusive monies (373, 383). Not until the eavesdropping Stagg overhears Barnaby’s musings does the latter’s simplicity become problematic. Playing upon Barnaby’s craving for that elusive pot of gold, the villainous Stagg convinces him riches will be more readily found back in the city (where Stagg and his chum, Mr. Rudge, can more easily wheedle funds out of Barnaby’s mother).

Barnaby’s mother returns to London, determined to keep her gullible son far from her evil pursuers, only to watch him run into an even larger pack of troublemakers eager to mislead him. As Stagg has noted, Barnaby is indeed a “likely lad” (381), one malleable enough to be quickly convinced of any enterprise’s virtue. This pliability makes Barnaby a reliable catalyst, a predictable tool in narrative hands which tend to place him in the action’s epicenter; repeatedly, his naïveté puts the necessary spark to this historical novel’s powder, explosively moving the plot along. The noble Gabriel Varden’s fears for “the lad – a notable person, sir, to put to bad

uses” prove well-placed (220). Coming upon an excited crowd of political dissidents on London’s outskirts, Barnaby is dazzled by the colorful ribbons and patriotic speeches, and quickly infers that the impending gathering must be a just one. After a few words from Lord George and his even more corrupt henchman Gashford, Barnaby commits himself to the cause, convinced his participation will honor the king and maybe earn him some elusive gold in the process. This places Barnaby, with his devious friend Hugh, in the middle of an anti-Catholic disturbance outside Westminster, and culminates in Barnaby’s striking a soldier from his horse in the belief that such violence will best serve Lord George, the revolt’s spokesperson (412). This audacious act propels the other demonstrators into action, unwittingly helping to inspire the atrocities at the heart of the novel. Though dismayed by what little of the subsequent violence Barnaby actually witnesses—Hugh and the other lawbreakers set him to guard an out of the way inn before they set about burning buildings—he remains steadfast, “evidently possessed with the idea that he was among the most virtuous and disinterested heroes in the world” (417-18). When soldiers later find and imprison Barnaby, the conspirators use their new hero’s incarceration as an excuse to storm and destroy detested Newgate. Again and again, Barnaby’s presence provides an impetus for plot movement. His pardon from a death sentence provides the tale with its most unabashedly pathetic moment, as the reader joins the London public in celebrating the last-minute liberation of the now well-known idiot.

We can rejoice in Barnaby’s rescue because his involvement in the chaos, unlike that of the other agitators, is driven by some notion of honor. Though an active part of the mob’s carryings-on, he regularly provides a moral yardstick against which the rest of the rabble are measured. Trained from childhood to complete a daily toilette, Barnaby rises at five o’clock

each morning to wash and prepare himself for another day of bravely defending the hideout's entrance, while his compatriots sleep off the night's debauch in their hideout's dark recesses:

To Hugh and his companion, who lay in a dark corner of the gloomy shed, [Barnaby] . . . seemed like a bright picture framed by the door, and set off by the stable's blackness. The whole formed such a contrast to themselves, as they lay wallowing, like some obscene animals, in their squalor and wickedness . . . that for a few moments they looked on without speaking, and felt almost ashamed. "Ah!" said Hugh at length . . . "He's a rare fellow is Barnaby, and can do more, with less rest, or meat, or drink, than any of us." (432)

The dramatic use of shadows here reiterates the point of Barnaby's hygiene and Dickens's bestial similes: an enormous moral divide separates Barnaby from his associates. Hugh may convince Barnaby to defend the Boot, but doing so requires manipulation of his friend's strong ethical sense; to prevent Barnaby from witnessing the imminent carnage, Hugh had to convince him that guarding the conspirator's lair would aid an ill-used politician (433, 439). Involving Barnaby in acts of *injustice* requires appealing to his sense of *justice*, in addition to relying on his usual inability to uncover others' hidden intentions.

Barnaby often demonstrates want of moral discernment, a deficiency rooted in a more elementary ignorance of malice and deception. At times, however, Barnaby plays the tried and true role of the *wise fool*, the court jester who somehow sees further than others in spite of his odd behavior and comic appearance. What sounds like gibberish, for instance, may prove to be solid sense. Barnaby's first extensive speech—delivered on a darkened highway over the bleeding and unconscious victim of a midnight robbery—sounds to Gabriel Varden like the drivel of an excited simpleton. Speaking over the wounded young man, Barnaby rambles:

"I know him . . . Hush! . . . He went out to-day a wooing. I wouldn't for a light guinea that he should never go a wooing again, for if he did some eyes would grow dim that are now as bright as – see, when I talk of eyes, the stars come out. Whose eyes are they? If they are angels' eyes, why do they look down here and see good men hurt,

and only wink and sparkle all the night?" (35-36)

Though Gabriel questions whether "this silly fellow" can actually know the injured gentleman, later events reveal that Barnaby did indeed recognize the victim, Edward Chester, having long served as the secret liaison between Edward and the beautiful daughter of Mr. Chester's greatest enemy. Barnaby has correctly discerned the seriousness of their romantic connection and, in the scene above, assumes correctly that Emma Haredale's eyes would "grow dim" if Edward were seriously injured. Also, while Barnaby's tendency to free-associate here produces the first of many pathetic fallacies, his intuitive linking of the stars with heavenly eyes also signals that sustained, serious concern with divine inaction that looms visibly above all Dickens's social-justice novels.

Another trait Barnaby shares with the fools and idiots of literary tradition is his small measure of prescience, a prophetic power that manifests itself waking and sleeping. One dream about "strange creatures crowded up together neck and heels" accurately predicts the violent mobs that will flood the streets in the middle of the novel, while another dream about his being chased by a man hidden in shadow accurately describes the spectre of his father, who even now dogs his steps (56-57). In the words of one critic, "we are shown that his visions are previews, his shadows foreshadowings of actual events. He is . . . endowed with a path to truth more direct and immediate than that available to educated minds."¹¹ Barnaby articulates arguably his most disturbing vision while conscious, with his father—assumed by Barnaby to be dead—hiding directly behind him in his mother's house. Recognizing the fear in his mother's eyes, Barnaby looks about in a vague attempt to find that crimson color that marks his wrist and dashes "the ceiling and the walls" in his dreams, then collapses onto a chair in an epileptic, "shivering" fit (150). The blood in Barnaby's dreams prefigures what we will later discover about his father's

crimes, as well as the impending “Riots of ‘Eighty.” As if to complete the portrait of knowing court fool, Barnaby also wears the appropriate costume: a hat decked out with broken peacock feathers, a bladeless sword hilt, and assorted ribbons and glass toys complement a green outfit awkwardly trimmed with bits of lace and cheap ruffles (35).

Dickens’s characterization of Barnaby proves as motley as the character’s self-fashioned garb. In addition to playing virtually every stereotypical role assigned the idiot by literary convention, Barnaby also exhibits a quite variable, even incoherent, disorder. Though his peculiarities consistently earn him the diagnosis of “idiot” from the tale’s most sympathetic and presumably enlightened characters—including Mr. Haredale, Barnaby’s own mother, and the narrator—the specific nature of his disorder evades easy definition. Even so, some critics have made the attempt. Beginning with the doubtful contention that Dickens always “looked on disease with the observing eye of the expert clinician,” Russell Brain concludes that Barnaby Rudge constitutes his “best-described mental defective” (124, 135). Most *elaborately* described, perhaps. The confidence with which critics have variously labeled Barnaby a “naïve fool” (Schmidt 93), an “idiot” (Crawford 43), a “half-wit” (Buckley 32), and a “madman” (Dransfield 79), however, suggests the difficulty of definitively categorizing Barnaby’s mental powers. Something is going on here, and it involves more than language’s inevitable slipperiness. Further clues to the enigma emerge from 20th-century critics’ attempts to sustain coherent diagnoses of Barnaby, diagnoses that usually rely on very selective evidence. George Gissing once argued that calling Barnaby an “idiot” constituted an egregious “misuse of language,” claiming that Barnaby was “simply insane” (in the modern sense), an apparently influential re-diagnosis (Schmidt 93). Thelma Grove, on the other hand, uses more recent terminology and diagnostic tools to locate in Barnaby “strong autistic features” consistent with those

characterizing *early infantile autism* (143). Grove grounds her own declaration in a detailed but vulnerable argument. She overlooks Barnaby's strong ties to his mother and his close friend Hugh, as well as his horror at bloodshed, to claim for Barnaby an "autistic withdrawal from normal relationships and lack of responsiveness to other human beings," then refers to Barnaby's making string puzzles on his fingers and wearing of baubles on his clothing in order to assert "a *pathological* preoccupation with certain objects regardless of their common usage" (143, 144, my emphasis). She ignores Barnaby's happy adventures outside the city so that she can sell his need for "adherence to a rigid routine" (143), then rediscovers that same wanderlust to demonstrate autistic "abnormalities of movement, which may be hyperkinetic" (145).

The reason such divergent opinions and terminology can be vigorously applied to a single character lies more in the instability of Dickens's original portrait than in our own shifting vocabulary and constantly changing, growing knowledge concerning mental retardations and autism spectrum disorders. Simply put, Dickens's portrayal is imperfect, his case study of idiocy inconsistent. His celebrated, youthful experiences observing Parliament members' idiosyncrasies and the urban poor's street smarts undoubtedly sharpened his eye for character detail, but Brain's praise of Dickens's powers of observation requires moderation, at least as concerns the novelist's earlier idiots. It will be useful to remember what Brain himself admits during a discussion of Old Chuffey's senile dementia, that at times "clinical accuracy [has] to be sacrificed to the needs of the plot" (132).

Barnaby most closely approximates a severely limiting form of developmental disability—what Victorian physicians categorized as "idiocy" and modern psychiatrists would identify as a species of *severe mental retardation*—when the reader first meets him on a lonesome road in the middle of the night and observes him through Gabriel Varden's eyes.

Homing in on repeated, increasingly vehement cries, Gabriel finds the distressed Barnaby hovering over a bloodied man he has found during one of his midnight rambles. In but a moment's time, Barnaby executes a number of odd behaviors that quickly mark him as the archetypal idiot. He wildly waves his torch about, shoves his frenzied face into another's personal space, communicates with a score of rapid, exaggerated nods and hand motions, and repeats the same word, "steel," over again as he tries to convey how the unconscious man was injured (34). The narrator eliminates any doubts concerning Barnaby's nature by describing his countenance as one "which told his history at once," which was lit "by something which was *not* intellect (34)."¹² He tells us Barnaby's "noblest powers were wanting," notes that the "confused disposition" of his clothes reflects "the disorder of his mind," and sets a precedent for every other character's linguistic practice by bestowing on Barnaby the time-honored, delimiting tag of "idiot" (34-37).

Barnaby maintains at least some of the idiotic raiment given him here through most of the novel. That he lives in a world governed by his own interests and peculiar perspective grows clearer with every "vacant look and restless eye," with each failure to properly interpret or even notice his mother's anxiety, and with gradually accruing examples of a tendency to yield "to every inconstant impulse" (212, 373, 207). The intellectual "disorder" noted by the narrator expresses itself in a profoundly atypical social posture. In addition to a predictable negligence of social graces—like that demonstrated when Barnaby horrifies innkeeper John Willet by placing his hand on a wealthy guest's sleeve (94)—Barnaby fails to understand the practical significance of human antagonisms. The patron whose arm he has touched, the villainous Mr. Chester, shares a longstanding animosity with Barnaby's old friend Mr. Haredale. This tension remains totally outside Barnaby's ken as he runs messages back and forth between the two men, absurdly taking

the liberty of inserting the endearment “loving friend” into Haredale’s message to his enemy (96). The same thing occurs when Barnaby discovers that his father still lives and, before he has learned of his father’s crimes, assumes that his mother will be happy to rejoin her husband (566). This tendency to read friendly relations into all kinds of associations also shapes Barnaby’s comic anthropomorphizing of Grip, a pet crow whom Barnaby believes both directs and protects his human companion (61, 147). Barnaby definitely requires *someone* to watch out for him, especially as he sometimes shows little tendency towards self-preservation. In the same way that he neglects the bodily threat presented by a torch’s flames and freezing temperatures in his first scene (34, 44), so does he appear inattentive to impending danger during the pre-riot period five years later.

While his intellectual limitations can endanger Barnaby, at times they actually allow his mother to mold his behavior and knowledge for his own protection. The seizure which incapacitates Barnaby during the visit of his (hidden) father gives his mother time to collect herself and better pretend that all is well when Barnaby comes to (150). She also relies on his faulty memory and rapidly shifting attention to shape Barnaby’s understanding of their current situation. When Barnaby insists early on in the tale that it is his birthday, forgetting the occasion’s celebration a week before, she tries “to make light of Barnaby’s remark, and endeavour[s] to divert his attention to some new subject; too easy a task at all times, as she knew” (152), just as she later hopes his rapidly shifting thoughts will erase any memory of Stagg’s duplicitous promises (394). More successful are attempts to use Barnaby’s faulty memory to keep him close during their secret sojourn in the country, repeating the same stories each day with hopes he will postpone his wandering, if only for a time:

He had no recollection of these little narratives; the tale of yesterday was new upon the morrow; but he liked them at the moment; and

when the humour held him, would remain patiently within doors,
hearing her stories like a little child, and working cheerfully from
sunrise until it was too dark to see. (371)

When circumstances require abandoning their straw-weaving occupation, Barnaby's pliability allows his mother to quickly convince him of the need to relocate: "Little persuasion was required to reconcile Barnaby to anything that promised change" (386).

Barnaby will follow his mother anywhere because, though naïve and changeable, he recognizes his mother's commitment to his well-being—even when he mistakenly thinks he knows better. It is a relational commitment he reciprocates. The plenteous kisses with which he peppers her after a long day's adventure (147) betoken an affectionate dependent unembarrassed to admit that dependence. Much of what Barnaby does, in fact, springs from a desire to recognize his mother's claim on him; he wishes first and foremost to please this primary caregiver and best friend. Convinced by Stagg that the crowded streets of London contain gold for the taking, Barnaby contemplates solely how money will change his *mother's* life. She will, he thinks, be happier once she has discontinued working long days and has adopted a finer wardrobe (383, 374). After returning to London, he ignores her pleas to avoid the mob of activists gathering outside the city, "bidding her be of good cheer, for their fortunes were both made now" (400). Though he soon forgets about money after joining the dissenters' ranks, Barnaby remains motivated by the image of his mother. He easily convinces himself not only that his actions will benefit a righteous cause, but that his cutting a dashing figure in the public arena will delight his mom. Riding in front of the crowd with his friend Hugh, Barnaby enjoys the pomp and circumstance only insofar as he can imagine viewing the spectacle through his mother's eyes:

"Wouldn't it make her glad to see me at the head of this large show?
She'd cry with joy, I know she would. Where *can* she be? She never

sees me at my best, and what do I care to be gay and fine if *she's* not by?" (405)

As the narrator later explains during Barnaby's defense of the rioters' hideout, Barnaby's current contentment springs from the conviction that his joining the movement has not grieved, but gratified, his mother: "She was at the heart of all his cheerful hopes and proud reflections. It was she whom all this honour and distinction were to gladden; the joy and profit were for her" (471). That his assumptions about his mother's feelings fall wide of the mark does not invalidate the singular nature of his enthusiasm.

These apparent lacunae in Barnaby's perceptions begin to close up, however, when one considers his occasionally acute awareness of his mother's emotional state. Hints of such sensitivity—inconsistent with the portrayal of either an idiot or imbecile—appear rather early in the novel. Consider, for instance, the evening we meet Barnaby and follow him home to his mother, in whose pale face he immediately reads unease. Though unable to determine the cause of her present state (her greedy, murderous husband has just paid a visit), and unaware that her anxiety arises from concern for her son more than for herself, Barnaby accurately comprehends his mother's anxiety; his own body registers the intensity of her feelings in a bout of uncontrollable shaking (148). After recovering from this seizure-like episode, Barnaby demonstrates additional flashes of intellectual strength across a scene which, ironically, works to inscribe Barnaby's intellectual *weakness* and faulty memory. Note the response to a reminder that his next birthday lies a year away:

"I remember that it has been so till now," said Barnaby. "But I think to-day must be my birthday too, for all that . . . I'll tell you why," he said. 'I have always seen you – I didn't let you know it, but I have – on the evening of that day grow very sad. I have seen you cry when Grip and I were most glad; and look frightened with no reason; and I have touched your hand, and felt that it was cold – as it is now. Once, mother (on a birthday that was, also) Grip and I thought of this after

we went up stairs to bed . . . you said something in a prayer; and when you rose and walked about, you looked (as you have done ever since, mother, towards night on my birthday) just as you do now. *I have found that out, you see, though I am silly.* So I say you're wrong; and this must be my birthday . . ." (152, my emphasis)

This passage illustrates nicely Dickens's desire to have it both ways, to render a pitiable, "silly" innocent who will solicit our sympathies, and at the same time provide an active player in the novel's central mystery who can help the audience begin to collect scattered clues. Though Barnaby's comedic conviction that another birthday has arrived only weeks after the last one plays as ridiculous and somewhat sad, striking recall of distant details lies tucked under his foolishness and impaired recollection, plus the associative powers that provide those memories with significance. He remembers well that his mother has grown oddly cold, tearful, and frightened on each of his birthdays, and assumes the presence of such uncharacteristically severe melancholy can only connote another such holiday. Barnaby reveals, too, a conscious awareness of and ability to explain (!) his own, repeated subterfuge (in repeatedly observing his mother's annual sadness without letting her know she is observed), an advanced capacity of dissimulation suggested elsewhere by both Gabriel Varden and Stagg (58, 377).

This passage also parades Barnaby's strikingly normal language. The inarticulateness that introduced him as an "idiot" has disappeared. Barnaby speaks with the sophistication of an educated adult, demonstrated above by his smoothly injecting an independent clause ("I didn't let you know it") into the midst of another clause, and his frequent use of adverbial phrases ("till now," "with no reason," etc.). Note also the logical ordering of his mother's growing distress as Barnaby describes first her generalized mood (sadness), then her physical expression of emotion (crying), next her heightened state of anxiety (fright), and lastly the tangible, empirical proof that her state was serious (he felt her cold hand). His language reflects a similar sophistication when

he describes his shadow's height as alternating between that of a church and that of a dwarf, then employs a long series of prepositions and geographic markers to describe how the shadow constantly shifted its position relative to his own body (56).¹³ The creativity on display in Barnaby's personification of his shadow—as with his impromptu mime of the appearance and posture of the figure who robbed Mr. Chester (150), or the vision of dancing and plotting conspirators he finds in some wind-whipped shirts hanging on a clothesline (94)—helps complicate still further the portrayal of one who began as a mere idiot. Dickens apparently feels he must have a central character whose language the reader and other characters can immediately understand, leaving them to be intrigued more by the strangeness of his ideas than the phrases he uses to express them. Perhaps the extra layer of linguistic complexity introduced by an idiot's faithfully rendered, compromised speech would have turned off even more of Dickens's readership in the early 40s, those accustomed to the sad but identifiable emotional and cognitive experience of protagonists like *Oliver Twist* and *Nicholas Nickleby*.

That Barnaby's portrayal is not just complex but internally inconsistent emerges across scenes in which Barnaby does or understands something recently identified as beyond him. Mrs. Rudge's attempt to escape the husband whom only she knows still exists provides one example of such proximate disparities. Determined to cut all ties with society when she moves to the country, Mrs. Rudge asks Mr. Haredale not to tempt Barnaby into divulging his mother's whereabouts if he should later wander onto the Haredale estate. In doing so, she signals her fear that Barnaby could be easily led to respond openly to anything asked him by old friends (215). It serves Dickens's purpose here to emphasize Barnaby's gullibility so as to dramatize the difficulty of keeping confidential their undisclosed destination. A few pages later, however, Dickens wants to stress the difficulties faced by the other players in this friendship—the

challenge Haredale and Gabriel Varden face in locating Mrs. Rudge against her will—and he accordingly constructs Barnaby Rudge anew, as one from whom it is nearly *impossible* to extract information (220).¹⁴ A similarly conflicted representation of Barnaby appears during the London riots, immediately before Hugh sets Barnaby to guard the Boot. In a matter of moments, Barnaby displays both strong deductive powers and a marked susceptibility to distraction, both loyalty *and* indifference. Overhearing ringleader Gashford's report that "the rioters who have been taken (poor fellows) are committed for trial, and that some very active witnesses have had the temerity to appear against them. Among others . . . a gentleman . . . one Haredale," Barnaby turns quickly around in astonishment and anger (440-41; ch. 53). Apparently, Barnaby not only understands words like "witness" and "temerity," but has a working knowledge of the court system, recognizes the role of his close friend Haredale in it, and understands Gashford's condemnation of his friend enough to be enraged! Unlikely enough in itself, this moment of intellectual prowess becomes still more incredible when Hugh quickly, completely erases both anger and epiphany from this suddenly perceptive idiot with a few well-placed, distracting words (440-41).

Immediately after this crisis has been averted and Barnaby dispatched to his new occupation, Gashford notes his surprise at Barnaby's "quick" understanding. Hugh's reply that "He's as quick sometimes . . . with his head – as you, or any man" (441) brings to the table the very issue at hand, one Dickens seems willing to recognize occasionally, if not immediately resolve. Over the course of the novel, Dickens actually sets a number of characters to questioning whether Barnaby indeed has an intellectual disability. During their return to London, Barnaby and Mrs. Rudge run into a presumptuous country gentleman determined to have Barnaby's talking crow as his own. Amidst his offers and growing demands for Grip, the

gentleman repeatedly denies the authenticity of Barnaby's intellectual deficiency. He calls the claim of idiocy an excuse for laziness curable with a ten minutes' flogging, cries that all real idiots should be locked up in institutions, then reiterates his doubt about Barnaby's condition when Barnaby refuses to sell his feathered friend and hurries to leave (389-91). Lord George Gordon, a political lynchpin in the tale's violent, historical backdrop, provides a second incredulous voice. Lord George runs into Barnaby as the crowd of demonstrators forms and, predictably, embraces the young man's enthusiasm with open arms. When Barnaby's mother asks that he reject Barnaby's bid to participate because he is "not in his right senses," Lord George bristles at the suggestion that supporting "the right cause" could be equated with mental instability (400). That his duplicitous secretary, Gashford, steps in to reject Mrs. Rudge's plea as "a very sad picture of female depravity," while Gordon's honest servant John Grueby later risks (and loses) his job trying to convince his employer of Barnaby's disability, only clarifies Lord George's mistake (400, 474). That is, Dickens cuts short these rather reasonable questions about Barnaby's true state by raising doubts about each questioner's motivation and character. The narrator implies that those inquiring into Barnaby's deficiency (villains, all of them) are in error, that their very doubt signals at least a lack of discernment and probably a disinterest in truth. Such moments seem intended to effectively quiet any questions about Barnaby's idiocy.

Perhaps Dickens wants to exhibit Barnaby's potential while simultaneously maintaining his idiocy so that his late change into a higher-functioning member of society seems the more remarkable by contrast. Up to the point when British soldiers take Barnaby prisoner for his involvement in the riots, Dickens has stressed repeatedly that Barnaby bears an authentic, very stable intellectual disability. In addition to rebutting implicitly the cross-examinations of each doubter, the narrator states directly that his five years in the country "had shed no brighter gleam

of reason on his mind; [that] no dawn had broken on his long, dark night” (371), while Barnaby himself tells the country gentleman that he has “always” been an idiot (390). And though Mrs. Rudge’s good friend Gabriel Varden claims Barnaby “grows wiser every day,” that “He will be a ‘cute man yet’” who one day puts “us to the blush,” Mrs. Rudge and the reader know that kindness, “no conviction of his own,” motivates the locksmith’s words (51).

Once Barnaby’s defense of the Boot has been interrupted by a detachment of Foot Guards who successfully (though with effort) disarm and capture him, matters change rapidly. As the soldiers lead Barnaby through crowded streets at the close of chapter fifty-seven, the narrator marches the reader straight into Barnaby’s mind. This shift in perspective, presumably meant to help us identify closely with Barnaby’s plight, apparently necessitates granting Barnaby a greater degree of self-reflection, perception, and deductive power. With the marching soldiers looking away from him, he can “hardly believe he [is] a Prisoner. But at the word, though only thought, not spoken, he [feels] the handcuffs galling his wrists” and “the warm current of his life run cold” (480). In this moment, Barnaby figures out his new legal status without its being explained to him, and knows enough to fear for his life. Led into the barracks for temporary safekeeping, Barnaby looks about with the attentiveness of one who knows what his situation portends: “nothing escaped his notice” as a long list of details impress themselves “upon his observation, as though he had noticed them in the same place a hundred times” (481). Placed in a dark cell, Barnaby fixes his gaze on the door in an attempt to “accustom himself to the gloom,” notes the similarity between the sentinel’s step and his own recent pacing at the Boot, and has “wit enough” to remain perfectly still while listening to a discussion of what he recognizes as his own fate—though neither his name nor recent actions are mentioned (481-83). A natural mix of anger and tears erupts from Barnaby during a soldier’s cruel reflections on how fun it would be

to twist off Grip's head, and he adds the syntactically and linguistically sophisticated resignation, "'Kill anything you can, and so revenge yourself on those who with their bare hands untied could do as much to you!'" (485). The image of a newly minted, self-assured Barnaby comes into sharper focus as he steps from this holding area into the hands of those who lead him to Newgate prison, assuming a defiant posture: "he would not have *them* think he was subdued or frightened. He walked out like a man, and looked haughtily from face to face" (485). This increasingly acute Barnaby will show only hints of the old deficits as he grows more aware of his decadent environment and of his new, heroic role within it.

As Barnaby and the father he discovers in prison wander about the countryside after Newgate's destruction, "a vague and shadowy crowd" of memories concerning other children's fathers and his mother's old grief surge into Barnaby's mind. Though the narrator attempts to qualify these as "strange promptings of nature, intelligible to him *as to* a man of radiant mind and most enlarged capacity," and though these associations lead Barnaby to the unlikely vision of a reunited, nuclear family, the hero demonstrates that he indeed possesses a "radiant mind" and "enlarged capacity" by his transformed perceptions (566, my emphasis). When he follows his father's directions to search London for the blind Stagg, he begins to see the violent rioters with new eyes, as "a legion of devils" (567). He grows physically ill at the fire, drunkenness, and destruction about him, but still manages to rescue his injured friend Hugh from a scene of rampant self-destruction by riding him out of town on an available horse (567-71). Later recaptured, Barnaby faces almost certain execution with aplomb, sorry only that he must watch Hugh be led away to his death first instead of being allowed to join him on the scaffold.

Refurbished with his new, heroic trappings, this character the narrator insists in calling an "idiot" finds rescue in the last-minute legal maneuverings of his friends and family, and

accordingly participates in the ending's ratification of relationships both present and future. (The farseeing narrator even grants him grey hair and long life—extremely rare occurrences among those with developmental disabilities.) The tale completes the metamorphosis of an unpredictable dependent into a sharp and capable member of society when the narrator describes Barnaby's psychological and physical recovery from recent events:

though he could never separate his condemnation and escape from the idea of a terrific dream, he became, in other respects, more rational. Dating from the time of his recovery, he had a better memory and greater steadiness of purpose; but a dark cloud overhung his whole previous existence, and never cleared away. He was not the less happy for this He lived with his mother on the Maypole farm Never was there a lighter-hearted husbandman It was remarkable that although he had that dim sense of the past, he sought out Hugh's dog, and took him under his care; and that he could never be tempted into London. (687-88)

To the last, the narrator continues his contrary claims, insisting in the same breath that Barnaby's memory has improved and also remains imperfect, that Barnaby largely forgets his London adventures and remembers specific details from them. (Hugh's dying request was that someone care for his dog.) Not long after explaining how the scene of maddened rioters and burning buildings was "fixed indelibly upon [Barnaby's] mind," a shocking spectacle to be sure, the narrator is trying to dismiss Barnaby's abhorrence of London as inexplicable (571).

Dickens apparently felt that reassimilating this important character into a predictable, comedic ending marked by renewed communities and requisite marriages required recasting Barnaby as someone who could be a more equal member of that welcoming circle. For years, Barnaby's mother has persisted in caring for what the narrator calls a problematic, "despised and slighted work," one whose gaiety gladdens her while his "ghastly and unchild-like cunning" sometimes frightens (208-9). Though she found some measure of comfort in his continuing innocence, she also despaired in long "watching for the dawn of mind that never came" (154,

209). Experience gave her face “the patient composure of long effort and quiet resignation” as she slowly realized her Barnaby’s adult years would not diminish his dependence. The two long ago moved from the hometown where everyone knew them to the anonymity of London, a metropolis where they could craft a life of isolation relieved only by occasional contact with a few persistent friends. In order to reestablish Barnaby and his mother’s place in a large and more intimate network of personal relationships, as Dickens does in the novel’s close, he must not only erase Mrs. Rudge’s desire for seclusion by bringing the family secret out into the open, but mitigate Barnaby’s dependence by diminishing the source of that dependence and thereby forming a more egalitarian domestic and social space on which to dim the stage lights. Instead of eliminating this particularly troublesome, intellectually disabled figure, Dickens virtually eliminates his inconsistent disability.

Mr. Dick: Man in the Middle

Whether or not one accepts Stanley Tick’s suggestion that the abused Mr. Dick is a type of Dickens himself, with Mr. Dick’s failed autobiographical attempts signaling Dickens’s own literary struggles and his repression of distressing childhood memories, Tick’s argument does begin a necessary process of reclamation. Though less central to the novel than Tick goes on to suggest, the resident simpleton of *David Copperfield* (1849-50) does deserve rescue from those who would dismiss him as “merely absurd,” a comic device and little else (Tick 145). Mr. Dick stands midway between Dickens’s earlier and later intellectually disabled figures in a number of ways. In addition to inhabiting Dickens’s favorite novel, published roughly halfway through his writing career, Mr. Dick links the author’s earlier, more stereotypical portrayals of cognitive disability with the later, more stable and empowering configurations located in Maggy and

Sloppy. Mr. Dick also figures as a transitional figure within his own novel, his role as clown slowly reconstituted into that of a more essential, productive, and equal member of his community.

This second generation of simple characters may not seem so pitiable as Smike, or serve plot action in such facile ways as did Barnaby, but they do occasionally serve up reliable doses of laughter: Dickens never completely abandons caricature's reliable effects. Of the five characters under consideration, Mr. Dick most closely approximates the archetypal court fool, his words made the more hilarious by Miss Trotwood's oscillations between total confidence in the man's supposed wisdom and the apparent need to correct his behavior. Copperfield first meets Betsey's grey-haired charge after Mr. Dick has nearly scared the boy into running back off the property onto which he has just ventured. After gazing at the travel-worn child out an upstairs window with a squinting eye and odd mix of shaking and nodding head movements, the laughing Mr. Dick comes downstairs to meet Betsey's befuddled nephew, only to be chastised for his impropriety and reminded of his intellectual powers:

“Mr. Dick,” said my aunt, “don’t be a fool, because nobody can be more discreet than you can, when you choose. We all know that. So don’t be a fool, whatever you are . . . you have heard me mention David Copperfield? Now don’t pretend not to have a memory, Because you and I know better.” (188)

The hilarious mix of praise and reprobation here reflect Miss Trotwood's standing confusion concerning the nature of Mr. Dick's condition. During one unguarded moment, she may begin admitting her ignorance about his real state to herself, and then the next boast loudly in his defense that ““nobody knows what that man's mind is except myself”” (200-1). Her secret perplexity makes assertions like the one above the more striking, by contrast. In this moment of Mr. Dick's introduction, she claims for him both awareness and intelligence, a clear

understanding of social mores and strong powers of recollection. That he has neither the reader and Copperfield both suspect, making each succeeding affirmation of Mr. Dick's "sound advice" and "common sense" increasingly entertaining (189, 207).

Patently comic, Mr. Dick's words also serve additional, practical functions within the intimate social space he inhabits. Mr. Dick's simple recommendations inadvertently provide Copperfield with a moral yardstick against which he measures himself (607-8), and supply Miss Trotwood with refreshingly direct propositions that spur her to action. When she asks Mr. Dick what she should do with the ten-year-old who has wandered onto her property, he offers, "'wash him!'" (189). Later, confronted with the vicious Mr. Murdstone's demand that she hand over his errant stepson, Miss Trotwood again asks Mr. Dick what she should do with Copperfield and he responds with another gem: "'Have him measured for a suit of clothes directly'" (207). In both situations, Mr. Dick skips the sociological intricacies of extended family—which he presumably does not understand anyhow—and suggests a course of action that presupposes acceptance, responsibility, and the need for immediate community formation.

In this and other ways, Mr. Dick proves himself quite the relationship builder. His joint guardianship of and developing friendship with David Copperfield help Miss Trotwood warm to the boy—whom she still, comically wishes were a girl—and his repeat visits to Copperfield's school bring the students there together in appreciation of his entertaining, ingenious shaping of objects from assorted odds and ends (245). He also becomes invaluable to the headmaster Doctor Strong, a man whose professional interest in Mr. Dick quickly becomes personal, the two friends spending long hours walking together while the Doctor reads Johnson's *Dictionary* to his eager listener. When the machinations of Uriah Heep plunge the Doctor into a deep depression that estranges him from his wife, Mr. Dick's familiarity with the couple puts him in the perfect

position to reunite them. Constitutionally unable to ferret out the source of his friends' difficulty, he is still able to recognize their feelings and compassionate them. Accordingly, he devotes himself to walking independently with Strong and with his wife Annie, becoming "what no one else could be—a link between them" (607). Mr. Dick also knits his community together by contributing to its financial stability; he promptly takes a job to support Miss Trotwood when Mr. Heep's secret maneuvering reduces her to poverty. This job, which begins as an "innocent deception" by Copperfield to occupy Mr. Dick's time and convince him of his usefulness, turns into a "way of being really useful" when Mr. Dick takes to copying out legal documents for Traddles (512-13). The task does present a significant challenge for the imbecile. Each time his mind wanders onto Charles I (the subject of a persistent monomania which compels him to write long sentences connecting the monarch's severed head with his own jumbled thoughts), his hands follow suit—with regretful consequences for his copy. Mr. Dick works hard at the task, however, and disciplines himself to switch over to the incomplete pages of his journal-like "memorial" whenever unwanted impulses strike him. Over time, he trains himself to put off writing in the memorial until the work day has passed, allowing him to earn a reliable, helpful sum of money each week.

Mr. Dick's relational and monetary contributions to his present community are the more noteworthy because his previous communal experiences failed him so thoroughly. Dickens's tone flips from the hilarious to the sober as Copperfield's aunt explains to the boy why Mr. Dick abandoned his surname, "Babley," years ago. Apparently, Mr. Dick had been "ill-used enough, by some that bear it, to have a mortal antipathy for it" (197). His brother, called to watch over his disabled sibling by their dead father's will, had disregarded his duty, refusing to expend the substantial energy and time required on a daily basis when caring for someone of Mr. Dick's ilk:

“A proud fool!” said my aunt. “Because his brother was a little eccentric . . . he didn’t like to have him visible about his house, and sent him away to some private asylum-place, though he had been left to his particular care by their deceased father, who thought him almost a natural. And a wise man *he* must have been to think so! Mad himself, no doubt.” Again, as my aunt looked quite convinced, I endeavoured to look quite convinced also . . . “nobody knows what that man’s mind is, except myself” (199).

Miss Trotwood dismisses point blank the notion that Mr. Dick is either mentally disabled or mentally ill—a ridiculous stance that imperils the authority of her perspective—but her decision to remove Mr. Dick from one of the period’s many home-based asylums ten years earlier and take him under her own care does situate her firmly within a small but progressive camp shared by Mr. Dick’s more perceptive father and a kind sister who cared for her disabled brother until her own marriage. Miss Trotwood and Mr. Dick’s more understanding, now absent family members represent an enlightened minority who not only believe that the intellectually disabled deserve a more personal, intimate approach to care, but who are willing to offer regular ministrations themselves instead of relegating such duties to servants or an institution. David Copperfield’s surprise that someone with such a compromised mind is living with his middle-class aunt instead of in a professional facility suggests the relative novelty of Miss Trotwood’s course of action (190). Like those unconventional practitioners whose course of *moral treatment* replaced physical restraint and isolation with gradual, patient behavior modification, Miss Trotwood has paired good-humored correction with relationship-building, allowing herself to become intimately involved in Mr. Dick’s daily life. Admittedly, she has gone a bit overboard, denying a disability which Mr. Dick himself claims as his own when she is out of earshot (635), but her peculiar brand of willful blindness allows this very opinionated woman to minister to someone she might otherwise ignore. She encourages his ambition to complete his “memorial,” and, though circumstances suggest Mr. Dick will never complete the task, she confidently

assumes it will be published some day (200). She also applauds Mr. Dick's hobby of turning failed project pages into kites he can fly and thereby—so he believes—disseminate his half-baked ideas at least to the locals (211).

Mr. Dick, that is, is an active, valued member of his community, despite his disabilities. While Copperfield may pity his kite-flying friend, he too considers Mr. Dick an equal (211). Where the friendship between Nicholas and Smike devolved into a condescending association connecting protector with protected, the ties binding this novel's hero and sidekick draw them and the other heroes onto a level playing field. Mr. Dick earns far more respect from his peers (and his reader) than his predecessors did, while occupying considerably less narrative space than they. In fact, as Dickens's intellectually disadvantaged characters begin to serve less central roles in their respective plots, their portraits become more stable and they demonstrate greater personal agency and freedom of action. It is as if the virus of stereotype that pervasively infected Smike (and Barnaby too, if only for a time) finds itself expunged almost immediately upon invading Mr. Dick's system.

Maggy and Sloppy: The Socially Viable, Assimilable Imbecile

Instead of employing another dramatic death or cerebral overhaul to resolve Mr. Dick's storyline, Dickens allows him to develop close interpersonal connections while retaining not only his life but his disability. Mr. Dick learns to control—though not eliminate—his wayward thoughts, and in so doing reflects Dickens's growing optimism about the educability and potential productivity of those with irreversible intellectual disabilities. Dickens had long commiserated with poorly treated idiots and imbeciles, commending as early as 1841 the humanitarian efforts of two English prisons that had seen moral management techniques improve

the self-reliance of inmates with “rickety intellects” (*Letters* 2:273). These sympathies deepened further after Dickens published *David Copperfield*. In 1853, Dickens made a long-delayed trip to the Essex Hall Asylum for Idiots near Colchester, an offshoot of the groundbreaking idiot asylum begun five years previously at Park House, Highgate. This visit rewarded Dickens’s optimism with numerous examples of disabled children who, having first been trained in proper hygiene, learned to write a bit or even complete simple mathematic problems. Dickens was fascinated by the possible generalizability of such training, by the prospect that many of these patients might soon contribute to society in meaningful, material ways. Following this visit, the June 4, 1853, issue of his weekly journal *Household Words* opened with an article entitled “Idiots,” co-written by the novelist and W. H. Wills. In this essay, Dickens takes to task those who dismiss the idiot as “a hopeless, irreclaimable, unimprovable being,” noting that:

closer study of the subject has now demonstrated that the cultivation of such senses and instincts as the idiot is seen to possess, will, besides frequently developing others that are latent within him but obscured, so brighten those glimmering lights, as immensely to improve his condition, both with reference to himself and to society. (*Household* 313).

Dickens’s hope involves not just the rudimentary rehabilitation, but the training and employment, of idiots—to the betterment of society as a whole. Predictably, he makes a particularly loud call for the publicly funded training and management of *pauper* idiots, a cross-section ignored by the current incarnation of the Poor Law (*Household* 316). After providing a useful but dry history of those recently established European and English institutions that have serviced idiots drawn from working and middle-class families, Dickens takes the reins from his co-author and directs his characteristic wit against the individuals he thinks least inclined to concern themselves with this population. English ladies, whose sensibilities presumably curtail any extended consideration of such “disagreeable matters,” receive the brunt of Dickens’s satire

in an unabashed effort to awaken *everyone's* sympathies to the widespread neglect and marginalization of a sizable, politically neglected population (*Household* 316). The upshot of Dickens's quickening concern is that subsequent idiots in his fiction bear stable intellectual disabilities that nevertheless do not disqualify them from full participation in those supportive communities benefiting from their presence.

Like those who have gone before, Maggy of *Little Dorrit* (1857) receives the requisite sprinkling of pity and good-natured laughter from her narrator. Large hands and feet, a curiously fixed smile, and an unseeing expression rendered by "Phiz" as large orbs with colorless irises join the more comic elements of her tattered costume and enormous hat in establishing an immediately recognizable character-type (142). Having served their purpose, however, these elements of Little Dorrit's friend slip into the background. The "great white cap, with a quantity of opaque frilling" continues to flap comically about whenever Maggy appears, but far more salient characteristics command our attention as soon as the narrator moves from describing her appearance to establishing her character. Maggy's first appearance, in which she excitedly runs into Amy Dorrit and drops a basket of potatoes, informs more than it entertains. As Arthur Clennam and Amy help Maggy gather her stock, the heroine praises her friend's self-reliance. Maggy, she explains, ekes out a living by selling potatoes and—as is often the case with Dicken's intellectually challenged characters—by running errands (142-43). The twenty-eight-year-old imbecile has also begun to read "with a large balance of success against her failures," enough to make appropriate purchases at a grocer's (144). Though Maggy obviously benefits from the occasional assistance and compassion of Amy, Maggy's living alone in independent lodgings underscores the extent of her self-governance. In addition, and unlike Mr. Dick who owed his improved circumstances to another person's removing him bodily from an abusive

environment, Maggy has taken the initiative to improve her situation herself. She gradually became so “attentive and very industrious” that her grandmother began allowing her to move in and out of the house without escort. Eventually, Maggy’s efforts paid off, and she gained “‘enough to do to support herself’” (144).

Maggy’s origins provide a stark contrast to her present, relatively independent, status. After a high fever compromised her mind’s development at the age of ten, she returned from a comfortable hospital to a hazardous environment that only grew more so as her grandmother struggled to deal with her transformed relative. The caregiver’s habitual drinking continued, as did the violent application of “‘[b]room-handles and pokers’” to the young girl’s body (143). Maggy’s grandmother, who once served as Amy’s own nurse, simply failed to provide necessary care for this more difficult dependent. Maggy’s physical weakness, her extremely poor vision, a predisposition towards spontaneous laughter, and a disability which prevented the twenty-eight-year-old’s mind from expanding beyond the cognitive capacity of a ten-year-old, presented a most difficult challenge to an otherwise capable guardian who just “did not know what to do with her, and [who] for some years was very unkind to her indeed” (144).

From Amy’s perspective, however, Maggy’s disabilities do not present a justifiable impediment to relationship: Maggy often functions as a permanent member of the Dorrit family during their residence in the Marshalsea Prison. She accompanies Amy on various errands about London, and when mealtime brings Amy back to the Marshalsea, Maggy frequently appears in the background, helping to set the table, prepare food, and clean up afterwards. Maggy runs errands, delivers messages, and helps out when a family member becomes ill. In less busy moments, she may appear in a corner quietly doing work with her hands, or eagerly waiting for Amy to tell her a story. And when chance suddenly makes Amy’s father wealthy, he sets out to

improve Maggy's wardrobe as well as that of his blood kin (470). Separated from Maggy during a subsequent continental tour with the family, Amy writes of how much she misses that friend who looked on Amy as her "little mother," asking Arthur to let Maggy know "'she never can have regretted our separation more than I . . .'" (521-22). Maggy has earned such allegiance. The reciprocated affection between these two women signals a more egalitarian social and economic relationship than that existing between either Smike and Nicholas or Barnaby and his mother. Unlike victimized, rescued Smike, who ever remained the *receiver* of goods and services—and quite unlike the naïve and malleable Barnaby—Maggy has removed herself from one environment and successfully inserted herself into a new social network that recognizes her membership as a valuable partner. Dickens's fully rendered and consistent portrayal of Maggy's character and abilities precludes her reduction to a cipher, to some kind of moveable type positioned wherever an imminent crisis requires the catalyst of her ignorance—or a somber moment awaits the comic relief of her odd appearance. Unlike Barnaby's, her intellectual faculties, self-awareness, and language do not shift to meet the changing demands of the plot. She speaks in the same manner in the last pages—complete with repetition, poor pronunciation, and simple diction—that she did when first introduced. Arguably, both the consistency of her characterization and the substance of her character owe something to her relatively *peripheral* position within the plot. Even more than Mr. Dick, that is, Maggy often appears in frame without hijacking our attention by way of traditional hijinks or sad spectacle, instead moving visibly but unostentatiously across the background.

In the same way, Sloppy of *Our Mutual Friend* attains a degree of self-dependence, his intellectual difference and comical quirks flavoring instead of overwhelming and controlling Dickens's characterization of his final imbecile. All the appropriate surface minutiae

unambiguously designate Sloppy's intellectual deficiency when he first appears. His long body, little head, angular frame, tendency to stare with open mouth, and the ease with which he breaks into loud laughter or violent tears, verify that he is indeed the "natural" Betty Higden took him for when she first began caring for the boy, now a man (200). And just as Maggy has her amusing headgear and Barnaby his tattered dress, Sloppy too has the idiot's humorous costume, in his case a profusion of buttons sewn across his clothes which "glar[e] at the public to a quite preternatural extent" (201). The very emblem of Sloppy's comedic role, however, also signals an area of competency and the future means to a measure of self-determination. The nimble hands which sewed this profusion of glass and wooden eyes across his chest also make Sloppy an able mangler, providing a steady source of income to help Betty make ends meet, and later win him the independent income of a cabinet-maker.¹⁵ Dickens also turns Sloppy's modest literacy to both comic and practical effect. The young man's facility at reading the newspaper allows him to entertain the children by dramatizing the different police voices described therein, and whenever a letter arrives in the mail, he reads out its contents for his elderly guardian who can no longer decipher hand-writing herself. "'You mightn't think it,'" Betty explains to the Boffins, "'but Sloppy is a beautiful reader . . .'" (198).

Betty Higden's words here recognize only to refute traditional expectations of the imbecile's mental and relational incompetence, and contribute to Dickens's portrait of Sloppy as a fully participatory member of his community. Sloppy functions as an integral part of his household, whether living with Mrs. Higden or Mr. and Mrs. Boffin, the retired couple who assume care of Sloppy when Betty leaves town. In both situations, though still under the watchful eye of a guardian, Sloppy is entrusted with considerable freedom of movement. He comes and goes as he pleases, accomplishing his professional duties as easily as he completes the

more . . . clandestine tasks assigned him by his friends. In addition to the woodworking profession he adopts after he relocates to the Boffins', Sloppy serves his new hosts by shadowing the mischievous Silas Wegg across the latter half of the tale, summarily depositing the villain in a scavenger cart when his subterfuge has been finally uncovered.

The novel's penultimate chapter marks Sloppy's apotheosis and, arguably, the culmination of Dickens's achievement in realizing a *relationally viable* intellectually disabled character. Abandoned at birth by unmarried parents and raised for a time in an unforgiving workhouse environment, Sloppy is yet able to move past the failed communities and intimate relationships of his youth and begin to shape his own. In these final pages, he calls for the first time upon the crippled but self-confident Jenny Wren and sets to wooing, if unwittingly, the woman Dickens implies will become his future wife. Jenny makes it easy for him, beginning their tête-à-tête by referencing the much talked-about incident in which he dexterously tossed Silas Wegg into a mud-cart. Sloppy returns the compliment, gawking at the beautiful hair she provocatively lets down, and praising the skill with which she has pieced together the doll clothes she makes for a living. Only after offering to carve an ornamental handle for a nearby crutch, an instrument he assumes belongs to her father, does Sloppy discover that the attractive woman before him is lame. When the determined but half abashed young woman demonstrates her stilted gait for the unconscious suitor, he dismisses her apology that her walk appears "not pretty," and pleases her with an encouraging, candid observation of her dexterity: "It seems to me that you hardly want it at all" (788). Similarly, Jenny's amusing suggestion that Sloppy is too "slow" to understand her references to the as yet unnamed, unseen "Him"—an imaginary suitor she has long claimed will one day step through the door and marry her—undercuts by indirectly ridiculing the idea that Sloppy is incapable of understanding and responding to her

inviting banter. (And, of course, this concatenation of dialogue and circumstance strongly implies that Sloppy himself will become the long hoped for “Him.”) In this way, happenstance allows the two to mitigate the stigmatizing force of one another’s disability, encouraging them to engage one another first as personalities, and only secondly as impaired bodies.

As one moves chronologically through Dickens’s oeuvre, his intellectually disabled characters demonstrate an increasing quantity of self-reliance and social competence. This is not, it should be noted, the result of methodical progress up some intellectual scale which assigns “idiots” a spot in the nether regions and locates the “feeble-minded” simpleton as just under normal. Dickens’s is *not* some linear path from journeyman inventor of the “idiot” to master maker of the “imbecile,” though it may at times seem so. Smike and (the as-yet-untransformed) Barnaby attain less stable and advantageous positions in their own communities not because they are severely disabled and their more successful successors higher-functioning, but because their respective plots require them to serve different functions—roles which allow for dramatically varying degrees of personal agency and social success. Smike and Maggy, similar in their respective histories of abuse, severely limited literacy, compromised understanding, and strong desire for companionship, are awarded differing degrees of relational success with the families that accommodate them. The testing of Nicholas Nickleby’s character requires a disposable dependent he can temporarily shepherd, a lamb that can be sacrificed at the sentimental feast that closes the novel without disrupting the many marriages that accompany it. Little Dorrit’s own happy ending, on the other hand, does not require Maggy’s complete removal. In fact, it requires her presence. Though briefly separated when the suddenly rich Dorrit family departs on a European tour, the two women reunite when another, equally abrupt financial shift returns the

family to poverty. Maggy remains beside Amy during the family tragedies that follow, through to a cheerful denouement that places her on the church steps along with the other secondary characters, there to await the arrival of the soon-to-be-married Miss Dorrit and Mr. Clennam.

In the same way, Barnaby and Sloppy evidence comparable competences, yet move along radically divergent paths. Both exhibit a money-making facility with their fingers, prove themselves trustworthy messengers for their caregivers, speak well even where they understand imperfectly, and demonstrate strong emotional ties to those close to them (along with an unashamed willingness to express that emotion openly). And yet where Barnaby requires a complete cerebral overhaul before he can be reassimilated into his own community, Sloppy steps confidently from one home to the next with no indication that either his intellectual capacity or his social skills have in any way been altered. The portrait of cognitive disability with which Dickens ends the novel provides his readers with his most empowering vision of intellectual otherness yet, a vision the more liberating because Dickens allows his readers to construct not only the likely course of their imbecilic hero's romantic future, but his very features and mannerisms. Unlike Barnaby, whose comic costume, peculiar physical postures, and odd behavior are repeatedly inscribed across nearly a quarter of George Cattermole's illustrations for *Barnaby Rudge*, Sloppy appears in *not one* of Marcus Stone's thirty-eight engraved plates for *Our Mutual Friend*.¹⁶ The closest we get to a sighting occurs in chapter sixteen, where the text accompanying the image of a doorframe explains that the concealed Sloppy is just inside, working furiously at pressing clothes. In the mature act of a true author-cum-social activist, Dickens manages to avoid altogether the visual cues that had worked to define and predetermine the extent of a disabled character's practical agency—both in fiction and in society—freeing the

reader to imagine this last intellectually disabled character as fully liberated from those traditional expectations and prejudices that so often, so completely, bound his kind.

¹ For a recent take on Wilkie Collins' interest in physical disability, see "My Old Delightful Sensation: Wilkie Collins and the Disabling of Melodrama," chapter three in Martha Stoddard, *Fictions of Affliction: Physical Disability in Victorian Culture* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004).

² Note Stagg's words to Barnaby's worried mother: 'I know what you would say: you have hinted at it once already. Have I no feeling for you, because I am blind? No, I have not. Why do you expect me, being in darkness, to be better than men who have their sight – why should you? Is the hand of God more manifest in my having no eyes, than in your having two? It's the cant of you folks to be horrified if a blind man robs, or lies, or steals; oh yes, it's far worse in him, who can barely live on the few halfpence that are thrown to him in your crowded streets, than in you, who can see, and work, and are not dependent on the mercies of the world. A curse on you! You who have seven senses may be wicked at your pleasure; we who have six, and want the most important, are to live and be moral on our affliction. The true charity and justice of rich to poor, all the world over!' (384). Charles Dickens, *Barnaby Rudge* (1841; London: Penguin Classics, 2003) 384.

³ Patricia M. Puccinelli, *Yardsticks: Retarded Characters and Their Roles in Fiction* (New York: Peter Lang, 1995).

⁴ Martin Halliwell, *Images of Idiocy: The Idiot Figure in Modern Fiction and Film* (Cornwall: Ashgate, 2004).

⁵ See chapter two, "Marital Melodramas: Disabled Women and Victorian Marriage Plots."

⁶ The terms "idiot" and "imbecile" had been commonly employed for centuries when making medical or legal distinctions between lower and higher-functioning individuals. The term "feeble-minded," used to signify someone with still more brainpower than an idiot or imbecile, only came into formal use around the 1870s. David Wright, *Mental Disability in Victorian England: The Earlswood Asylum 1847-1901* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001) 11, 182.

⁷ *Nicholas Nickleby*, dir. Stephen Whittaker, perf. Charles Dance, James D'Arcy, Sophia Myles, Lee Ingleby, Dominic West, 2000, DVD, Acorn Media UK Ltd., 2002. *Nicholas Nickleby*, dir. Douglas McGrath, perf. Christopher Plummer, Charlie Hunnam, Romola Garai, Jamie Bell, MGM, 2002, DVD, Columbia Tristar Hom, 2003.

⁸ See Easson's editorial notes to chapter twenty-two (692).

⁹ What David Wright says of the word "insane" applies readily to its close cousin "mad." In his historiography of the Earlswood Asylum, Wright notes that nineteenth-century medical and legal usage of the term "insane" encompassed "idiots" as well as "lunatics." The association

of “insane” specifically with mental illness would be a twentieth-century development. David Wright, *Mental Disability in Victorian England: The Earlswood Asylum 1847-1901* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001) 10.

¹⁰ “‘The Lord is slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, forgiving iniquity and transgression, but he will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of fathers upon children, upon the third and upon the fourth generation’” (Numbers 14:18, KJV).

¹¹ Juliet McMaster, “‘Better to be Silly’: From Vision to Reality in *Barnaby Rudge*,” *Dickens Studies Annual: Essays on Victorian Fiction*, 13 (1984) 2.

¹² This first detail is doubly ironic. Until we turn the page and come upon Phiz’s fourth illustration, we do not have the facial features to read and thus cannot know Barnaby’s “history at once.” Also, despite the assertion that character can be read in one’s countenance, the narrator obviously feels two full pages of exposition necessary to elaborate upon the clue provided by the illustration, a situation that, perhaps unwittingly, begins to interrogate those physiognomic assumptions with which Dickens holds a troubled alliance.

¹³ Having an omniscient narrator who usually stands well outside the action makes it even easier to attribute the structure and content of Barnaby’s words directly to the character himself, rather than to some immediate participant in the tale’s events whose perspective shapes the telling.

¹⁴ This disparity reflects not just a shift in perspective from that of a protective mother to that of concerned friends, but a highly variable construction of Barnaby’s facilities. These various heroes might have different slants on Barnaby’s abilities, but totally polarized opinions? Unlikely.

¹⁵ A mangler is one who presses clothes. Also, it is worth noting that one idiot Dickens described at length in the 1853 article “Idiots,” which recounts his visit to the Essex Hall Asylum for Idiots in the same year, had “acquired a passion for sewing on buttons. . . . If he can only find a visitor with a loose button or with a button wanting, he is happy, and instantly sets to work” In the same paragraph, Dickens describes another idiot who learns carpentry, a skill similar to that of furniture-making, which Sloppy later pursues. Charles Dickens and W. H. Wills, “Idiots,” *Household Words*, 167 (June 4, 1853) 314.

¹⁶ Barnaby appears in thirteen of Cattermole’s fifty-nine illustrations. Smike, Maggy, and Mr. Dick are each pictured five times in their respective novels.

Chapter Four

Hierarchies of Mind: An Abiding Critique

of ‘Intellectualist’ Ideology and Discourse in Robert Browning’s Poetry

The same year Robert Browning completed *The Ring and the Book* (1868-69) and won himself a good measure of long-overdue acclaim, Francis Galton published the first edition of *Hereditary Genius* (1869) and earned himself a very different place in posterity. The creeds informing these two works could hardly have been more at odds. The proto-eugenicist’s consideration of cognitive differences—a study fraught with misogynist, racist, and “intellectualist” prejudices—represented just the kind of hierarchical, disunifying ethos Browning habitually took issue with in his work.¹ Like much of his poetry, Browning’s *magnum opus* interrogated classism, sexism, and intellectual hauteur, propounding a radically egalitarian ethic that sought to circumvent socially and politically constructed obstacles to community. At this particular cultural moment, as elsewhere during his long career, Browning had his work cut out for him, his decidedly love-centred idealism vying with a pervasive assumption that mappable physical and developmental differences necessarily constituted barriers—not invitations—to relationship.

Such divisive, pseudo-scientific condescension as Galton’s (he argued that Britain’s “evil inheritance” should be eliminated through segregation and selective breeding) was an unfortunate result of the era’s practical efforts to measure and classify every possible type of human faculty.² Accelerated by scientific advances and philosophical enquiry during the Enlightenment, this impulse rapidly transformed medicine during the nineteenth-century, expanding the growing field’s supply of nosologies with ever more numerous and more refined

species of pathology. Today's "vulgar hierarchy of diseases," with its uses both practical and ideological, has roots in this earlier period's preoccupation with codifying biological norms against which apparent deviance could be measured—and towards which the doctor and his sick patient could strive.³ Without a doubt, such standards provided useful, empirically verifiable benchmarks for the emerging profession; they also, however, reinforced culturally pervasive, stratifying notions concerning human health, beauty, and intelligence. As David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder note,

The burgeoning of medical vocabularies and taxonomies of the body provided an impetus for the evolution of [a] *pathological aesthetic*, and nineteenth-century medicine and art mutually reinforced disabled bodies as sources of cultural fascination and leering contemplation.⁴

Disabled bodies and, as Galton demonstrated, disabled *minds*. This "pathological aesthetic" presupposed a universal ideal of not only what the British body should look like and how far it should be able to move under its own power, but of what kind of brain should provide directions to its limbs and language to its lips.

Browning, who regularly interrogated socially divisive, essentializing acts of categorization, would have been most uncomfortable with such a double-edged ideal, one that cut both ways when an individual's physical differences were compounded by intellectual disabilities. The term "idiot," traditionally employed as a colloquial and sometimes medico-legal indicator of permanent mental disability, became part of a more narrowly delimiting and formal diagnostic system when the Lunatics Act of 1845 formalized the parsing of the "insane" into "lunatics," "idiots," and "persons of unsound mind" (the latter category indicating those whose abrupt mental dysfunction had resulted from trauma or disease). Contemporary practice further subdivided this grouping, pursuing old distinctions between "idiots" and less disabled "imbeciles," newer divisions like that separating congenital idiocy and "acquired" (presumably

curable) idiocy, and, eventually, creating new classifications for the more mildly disabled “feeble-minded” and the criminally inclined “moral defective.”⁵ Unfortunately, such clinically reasonable dissection of intellectual disability into ever-more discrete classes encouraged rather unfortunate political decisions. As David Wright points out in *Mental Disability in Victorian England* (2001), these types of divisions made it much easier for government officials to act selectively when creating treatment facilities for the intellectually disabled. Despite the optimistically comprehensive objectives of the 1845 Act, for instance, most “incurable” and “non-violent” idiots were ultimately abandoned to the workhouses where they had congregated, just as the “feeble-minded” were later segregated via placement in “Silly Schools” and still more isolated “colonies” by a country increasingly concerned with purifying its gene pool.⁶

The terminology attending such legal and medical descriptions of difference tended to *demarcate* as well as delineate, the medical discrimination of corporeal differences providing the occasion for discrimination of another sort. Categories that defined the parameters of an individual’s disease or disability within the hospital and asylum might streamline patient care, but their application elsewhere could add the weight of authority to the prejudices of an already unsympathetic and fearful population ready to define its able-bodied and able-minded normativity against the handy “other.” Flung at the idiot on the streets of London or the itinerant imbecile wandering the banks of the Severn, these labels were unlikely to serve a productive function, instead distinguishing so as to circumscribe a figure who was considered a public eyesore, a drain on the government’s resources, a product of his parents’ sinful living, or maybe a pitiful spectacle deserving stopgap charity. Applied in more figurative fashion to a clumsy servant, a careless cab driver, or a student with poor marks, terms like “idiot” and “simpleton”

still carried a wallop, negative echoes of the originary concept resonating loudly enough to unequivocally signify the target's difference, and his/her relational distance from the speaker.

It might be argued that Browning's own use of the vernacular perpetuated the stratifying denotations of these terms. In his letters, he is perfectly willing to call one literary critic a hypocritical "idiot" for publishing an opinion he (the critic) did not actually hold; to compare a second critic to an *actual*, intellectually challenged idiot for apparent maliciousness and failure to properly interpret a poem; and to disparage as "imbecile" a recently published, false story about a friend.⁷ Such antagonistic, condescending deployment of these labels, however, is normally reserved for aesthetic judgments—for the press, for fellow writers he considers "poetical cretins" or the creators of "rarest . . . imbecilities"—and perhaps for long-despised targets like "mesmerism, spiritualism and other imbecilities."⁸ Elsewhere in his letters, one encounters light-hearted descriptions of the "exasperatingly imbecile" indecision of friends and family, the bothersome "imbecility" of specific actions taken by his wife's beloved siblings, and musings on his own, "old imbecile way" of growing attached to even the most inhospitable locales.⁹ Browning does not, that is, exercise such terms to deride real intellectual deficiencies, but to indicate apparent failings in artistic judgment, pragmatism, and moral behavior.

The same pattern governs Browning's poetry, where he works more methodically to question his contemporaries' dependence on perceived intellect as a measure of human value. Unlike Galton, who openly bypasses idiots and imbeciles as a group he has "not cared to occupy [him]self much with," and in stark contrast to those who would agree with William Blake that what "can be made explicit to the idiot is not worth my care," Browning envisions progressive social spaces in which intellectual condescension is anathema, his poems together shaping an alternative cultural imaginary in which character—not cognitive capacity—is king.¹⁰

Why I Am a Liberal: Browning's Push Towards a Radical Egalitarianism

Like many another wordsmith, Browning regularly probes the inherent limitations of language, as well as the social problems created by abusing that tool. Society's irritating tendency to describe and define using classifications based on flawed criteria compounds the poet's concern with language's inability to represent precisely a wide range of human characters and situations. His Arabic mystic Ferishtah curses humanity's unwillingness to distribute justice one individual at a time, instead "[lumping] his kind i' the mass" and dispensing sweeping, indiscriminate judgments with a single breath ("A Camel-Driver," 1887, l. 83). Christopher Smart, the English poet who composed *Song to David* (1763) while in a madhouse, emerges from a period of creative insanity and flexed perceptions only to settle into what Browning casts as an old, limiting mode which drops dry ideas into prescribed compartments: "[S]traight the world / Darkened into the old oft-catalogued / Repository of things . . ." ("With Christopher Smart," 1887, ll.165-67). And Aristophanes, who imagines and mocks the moral platform to be assumed by Euripides's successor in "Aristophanes' Apology: including a Transcript from Euripides: being the Last Adventure of Balaustion" (1875), acknowledges the prevarication driving his own, comic characterizations of politicians as either "sweet" and "dear," or "rogue" and "wretch"—a dichotomizing practice strongly repulsed by Balaustion, the principal, principled narrator (ll. 2503-5). Aristophanes' artistic approach reads as particularly reckless given his shrewd recognition that "truth's in thing not word, / Meaning not manner!" (ll. 2502-3), and his furtive use of that valuable insight to amuse instead of counsel.

Browning does not, of course, abhor classification systems *in toto*. His poetry often affirms evaluations based on personality distinctions shaped by a character's moral fiber, degree of deliberation prior to judgment, or willingness to act promptly to realize a passion. In contrast,

he censures assessments that instead hinge on such variables as race, class, education, or native intelligence, on the other hand. His sustained unease with ideologically suspect categorizations of *intellect*—the less politically visible member of this politicized grouping then and today—provides modern readers with a unique and extraordinary exhibition. For a highly intelligent, self-educated writer whose most esoteric readings intimately inform his poems, Browning displays a surprisingly moderate appreciation of learning and intellect. His works challenge on a number of fronts the routine acceptance of intelligence as a critical measure of a person's worth, his most compelling recourse lying, as always, in character. Figures who employ divisive, intellectual stratification systems with abandon, as do Browning's Hohenstiel-Schwangau, Aristophanes, and Mr. Sludge, prove themselves inept, myopic, or villainous. More obviously sympathetic voices, like the narrators of "Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau, Saviour of Society" (1871) and "Red Cotton Night-Cap Country, or Turf and Towers" (1873), work instead to weaken the stigmatizing force of such easy distinctions.

Browning complements this destabilization of what will henceforth be called *hierarchies of mind* with studied, subtle use of the terms commonly used (whether diagnostically or derogatorily) to denote limited intelligence. His use of vigorous idiom and earthy diction—widely recognized as a successful means of heightening dramatic and psychological tension in his poems—becomes something more, a means of achieving certain philosophical and sociological ends. More perceptive characters, such as Balaustion of "Aristophanes' Apology," Paracelsus, and the narrator of "Christmas Eve" (1850) employ words like "imbecile" and "idiot" primarily to indicate moral or spiritual, not intellectual failings, and a number of these verdicts prove *self*-deprecating. Characters of more questionable judgment, including Uggocio Stefani of "Pippa Passes: A Drama" (1845), the inimitable Mr. Sludge, and *The Ring and the Book's*

consummate villain, Guido Franceschini, deliver such linguistic payloads with more venom and less discrimination, wielding such labels as the sharpest, most readily available weapons to hand.

Language's ability to quickly reify and make available for public consumption a mind's most nascent, hastily formed concepts and categories can make the medium seem a most wild and unpredictable method for transporting meaning. Little wonder that Browning found refuge in drawing, sculpture, and music when his meticulously turned phrases failed to have their desired effect on the reading public.¹¹ This master artisan of words, whose favorite party trick involved rapidly creating rhymes for the most ungainly sounds and obscure terms, spent an inordinate amount of time foregrounding the *limitations* of this primary instrument. The poet-hero of his early *Sordello* (1840) fails to fashion a language practice that will convey his most potent insights, in part "Because perceptions whole, like that he sought / To clothe, reject so pure a work of thought / As language" (2.589-91). One of Browning's final collections, *Parleyings with Certain People of Importance in Their Day* (1887), provides similar, repeated considerations of linguistic limits. "Fust and his Friends: An Epilogue" (1887), a closet drama commemorating Europe's first type-set text, displays at least as much apprehension as optimism about the new medium. While the printing press may promise to "Fix fact fast" and "Falsehood . . . to nothingness [hurl]," Fust remains anxious about having possibly "hatched . . . a strange serpent, no cygnet" (ll. 303, 295, 153-54):

Through me does Print furnish Truth wings? The same aids
Cause Falsehood to range just as widely. What raids
On a region undreamed of does Printing enable
Truth's foe to effect? Printed leasing and lies
May speed to the world's farthest corner – gross fable
No less than pure fact – to impede, neutralize,
Abolish God's gift and Man's gain! (ll. 449-55)

As with the medium, so with the mediated. Donald Hair argues in *Robert Browning's Language* (1999) that Browning's posture towards language was heavily influenced by John Locke's theory that words are arbitrary, loose emblems of the ideas they signify, as well as by Dr. Johnson's conclusion that (as Hair phrases it), "words shift and change in meaning because they represent the choices of the individual mind, and so are intimately bound up with human knowledge and human psychology (12).¹² In other words, the individual words carried along on the wave of language prove every bit as slippery as the imperfect ideas they merge to form. Browning's narrators cannot even tame the shifting significations of those key terms appearing most frequently in his poems. In "With Francis Furini," the speaker draws attention to his reluctant use of the Brownian staple "soul" and its constant companion "body." After the appearance of the former he adds, resignedly, "*some* name we need" (l. 370, italics added). "With Charles Avison" displays a similar preoccupation with linguistic limitations through an extended parenthetical aside on the closely related "soul" and "mind":

... 'Soul' – (accept
 A word which vaguely names what no adept
 In word-use fits and fixes so that still
 Thing shall not slip word's fetter and remain
 Innominate as first, yet, free again,
 Is no less recognized the absolute
 Fact underlying that same other fact
 Concerning which no cavil can dispute
 Our nomenclature when we call it 'Mind' –
 Something not Matter) – 'Soul,' ... (ll. 139-47)

This inevitable failure to fix, or contain, the real within arbitrary constructs finds its simplest, most sweeping expression in "With Bernard de Mandeville" (1887) when the narrator suggests reaching beyond the constructed altogether, making what many modern critics would consider the most audaciously naïve assertion: "Look through the sign to the thing signified" (l. 192).

The metaphysical signified to which Browning habitually gestures—identified by Balaustion as that “clear thin spirit-thrust of lightning – truth!” (“Aristophanes’ Apology,” l.3156)—is never far removed from more immediately tangible, cultural, and socio-political concerns. What Warwick Slinn finds in “the Bishop Orders His Tomb at St. Praxed’s Church” (1845) can be located in much of Browning’s work: many of his poems work to exhume and critique those “appropriations and structuring processes through which institutional discourses order our world.”¹³ In this, he is joined by his wife and renowned poet Elizabeth Barrett, the couple’s shared social concerns sometimes leading to joint poetic visions and political action. While in Italy, for instance, they planned to publish a joint volume of poems on the Italian question.¹⁴ Though this particular project never came to fruition, Arabella Moulton Barrett’s request in 1854 that her sister and brother-in-law contribute to a London charity bazaar did produce EBB’s “A Song for the Ragged Schools of London” (1854; 1862) and Browning’s similarly themed “The Twins” (1854; 1855). The two poems were initially printed together in a thin pamphlet to benefit that cause.¹⁵ Despite Robert’s implication in their earliest correspondence that his poetry was dramatic without being morally or socially relevant—that he “only [made] men & women speak”—the two could speak with a united voice on certain contemporary issues.¹⁶ In taking issue with exclusionary and belittling attitudes directed towards the intellectually disabled, Browning would expand his sense of social justice just a bit beyond those issues of socioeconomic class, race and gender so clearly embraced by him and EBB, though his own poetic voice would rarely speak as vociferously or directly as his wife’s voice.

Those searching for clear, loud denunciations of Victorian inequity will find fertile material in the confrontational poems by EBB that successfully swayed public opinion in her time. Her own impatience with racial injustice, expressed with relative control in “Hiram

Powers' 'Greek Slave'" (1850), bursts all constraints in the oft-anthologized "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point" (1850), a powerfully imagined evocation of a distraught, escaped slave who has just killed her pale-faced child. This poem, flourished by American abolitionists across the sea, complements the earlier "The Cry of the Children" (1843), a poem that actively shaped policy in Barrett Browning's own country despite what Antony Harrison has identified as Elizabeth's practiced, pre-1850 *denial* "of the ideological designs on readers that arise from sociopolitical conditions and events surrounding the production of poetry."¹⁷ The poet also decried the various types of psychological and domestic enslavement historically faced by women. Poems like "A Romance of the Ganges" (1838) and "The Romaunt of the Page" (1838), for instance, effectively subvert the conservative cast of the sentimental paintings they were created to accompany. The popular *Aurora Leigh* (1857) engages inequality on a number of fronts, demanding equal recognition for the female writer, social acceptance of the unmarried mother, and a new blindness to distinctions of class and wealth. *Poems before Congress* (1860) articulates an equally vehement plea for community, this time on an international scale. Criticized by a British public less sympathetic to the Italian Risorgimento than Elizabeth, this collection unabashedly confronts yet another fissure, that dividing nation from nation in the golden age of British imperialism.¹⁸

While Barret Browning's popular voice and strident grappling with inequality tended to obscure her husband's less direct engagements with similar topics,¹⁹ abundant evidence of those democratic sympathies that would make him sensitive to the intellectually disabled lies scattered throughout his works. Rowena Fowler suggests, for instance, that Browning weaves subtle anti-slavery threads throughout poems like "Paracelsus" and "Cleon" by using "a nexus of imagery of chaining, branding, and fettering," and by spinning "narratives of subjugation and escape."²⁰

Similarly, the freedom-touting author of “Why I am a Liberal” (1885), while not calling for Italian liberation as overtly and fervently as Barrett Browning in “Casa Guidi Windows” (1851), does sympathetically construct the psychology and motivation of revolutionaries like young Luigi of “Pippa Passes” (1841) and the first-person narrator of “The Italian in England” (1845). A number of Browning’s other works implicitly critique those assorted autocratic powers—familial, marital, or royal—which complicate an individual’s capacity to realize a romantic liaison, a freedom he and Barrett Browning claimed when they eloped to Italy. Poems manifesting this particular preoccupation include “The Statue and the Bust” (1855), “The Flight of the Duchess” (1845), and “In a Balcony” (1855). “Instans Tyrannus” (1855), an ahistorical poem about an unnamed but memorably abusive tyrant and the righteous underling he fails to break, indicts abuse of power in its most extreme and unalloyed form.

Unlike this unnamed tyrant, many of Browning’s contemptible characters demonstrate their antagonistic, hierarchical tendencies less through violence than equally problematic, venomous condescension. “Of Pacchiarotto, and How He Worked in Distemper” (1876), a riposte to attacks by the dishonest and malicious critic Alfred Austin, introduces an equally haughty stand-in for Austin, the Renaissance artist Jacopo Pacchiarotto. To better exercise his (supposedly) inerrant judgment of “What the dark is, what the light is, / What the wrong is, what the right is, / What the ugly, what the beautiful . . .” (ll. 34-36), the second-rate painter covers the walls of a grotto with images representing every social class in Siena, then sets to instructing each figure on its appropriate place and duty in the various hierarchies he concocts. Artists he condemns as vulgar, the purportedly unredeemable “Poor Sort,” and a number of others he dismisses out of hand: “why mention all / Obstructions that leave barred and bolted / Access to the brains of each dolt-head?” (ll. 147-50). Pacchiarotto’s absurd behavior here and his

subsequent, failed attempts to pull the citizenry out of their “ignorance” and into the light of his own reputed “knowledge,” underscore the preposterous presumption of his categorizing impulse (l. 254). Two days of sleeping with a rotting corpse in a sepulchre—part of a desperate attempt to escape his angry enemies—fail to prompt any real self-evaluation. Though this comically inept activist abandons his attempts to “illumine” the masses, he firmly retains his conviction that the “fools” will remain the worse for rejecting his instruction (ll. 332, 450).

Browning’s Aristophanes also dodges truly egalitarian representations of human society. Despite a forward-thinking project which advocates peace and challenges the authority of despots and blundering politicians (ll. 2987-3007), Aristophanes ends up applying his parodic paste a bit too liberally, slathering the democratic ideas of the theoretical successor to Euripides with what he intends as the most contemptuous satire. This successor will, Aristophanes anticipates, “““Recognize in the very slave, -- man’s mate, / [will] Declare him brave and honest, kind and true, / And reasonable as his lord, in brief””” (ll. 2126-28). Aristophanes mocks an expected leveling of ancient social distinctions firmly rooted in both class and gender. The theoretical playwright he envisions might—horrors!—preach a reevaluation of women and slaves that places them coequal with men, “““not as, to please your pride, / They should be, but your equals, as they are””” (ll. 2131-32). Browning’s Aristophanes will have none of it. To him, certain people—whether by virtue of race, gender, birth, or station—unquestionably belong in the lower ranks with those others who thoughtlessly ““Eat, drink, make merry, mind their own affairs / And leave state-business to the larger brain”” (ll. 1452-53). The ““best by brain,”” claims Aristophanes, are those chosen few who deserve influence and power, and who will accordingly maintain an appropriate divide between ““what’s high and low, what’s rare and vile”” (l. 2463).

Browning's apparent willingness to interrogate the accepted glorification of intelligence meant taking on the modern-day equivalents of his Aristophanes, those like Francis Galton whose socially disunifying hierarchies of mind, as suggested earlier, rested on equally troubling racist and sexist presuppositions. In the first preface to *Hereditary Genius*, the father of eugenics admits that an "ethnological inquiry . . . into the mental peculiarities of different races" birthed his study of male intelligence. He later claims for Europeans "a much greater average share [of intelligence] than men of the lower races," those like "the lowest of the Negro races," and he avoids dealing at all with *female* minds by referring his readers to their own sense of "decorum."²¹ And despite Galton's relatively progressive ideas concerning class—he believed geniuses rose from "the humbler ranks of life" as often as not—he brazenly employs *eminence*, or "high reputation," as his primary criterion in identifying one's supposed intelligence.²² As a poet who enjoyed resurrecting the most obsolete historical personages, Browning would have only been galled by Galton's focus on celebrity. As noted earlier, the scientist's prejudices and arrogant tone (worthy of Browning's Sludge) represented just the kind of pervasive attitudes Browning would tend to tackle.²³

Browning did once claim "the reasoning powers" as the "eyes of [his] soul," but he never considered the mind and spirit to be either synonymous or coequal.²⁴ Reason might illuminate, but it could also obscure, the outcome always dependent upon one's end-goal. Browning's taking issue with an over-emphasis on knowledge and intellect—pegs on which his laurels hung then and today—comes as an odd but refreshing kind of self-abnegation.

Witness "With Francis Furini" (1887), where the narrator concludes that humanity possesses only enough knowledge "as shows that still / It ends in ignorance on every side" (ll. 283-84), or the powerful elegy "La Saisiaz" (1877), in which the mourning poet grapples with

his half-knowledge of the afterlife and concludes “For at what moment did I so advance / Near to knowledge as when frustrate of escape from ignorance?” (ll. 361-62). The dying St. John, who in “A Death in the Desert” (1864) recounts his missional work following the resurrection of Jesus, claims only one hierarchy as appropriate, that marking the individual’s gradual progress up the ladder leading to the divine (ll. 424-34). Those whose feet find purchase on the rungs of reason and earthly intelligence receive only John’s pity. To his mind, a kind of death occurs ““When a man’s loss comes to him from his gain, / Darkness from light, from knowledge ignorance, / And lack of love from love made manifest”” (ll. 483-84). Later, he repeats, ““What good of giving knowledge if, because / O’ the manner of the gift, its profit fail?”” (ll. 520-21). In the context of such teaching, the barely visible, idiot-like Bactrian surviving St. John becomes a suitable personification of Browningsque virtues, despite his inability to relate John’s story himself. This “wild childish man . . . could not write nor speak, but only loved” (ll. 649-50). In Browning’s poetry, such focused love always routs frail knowledge. “Paracelsus” (1835), one of Browning’s earliest and most *subjective* poems, contains another narrator convinced that:²⁵

‘were man all mind – he gains
A station little enviable. From God
Down to the lowest ministrant,
Intelligence exists which casts our mind
Into immeasurable shade. No, no:
Love, hope, fear, faith – these make humanity . . .’ (3.1023-28).

In the company of such ubiquitous reconsiderations of intelligence’s value, the famous injunction from Browning’s love poem “One Word More: To E.B.B.” (1855)—“Where the heart lies, let the brain lie also” (ll. 4, 142)—accumulates new layers of significance, the ordinal arrangement of “heart” and “brain” suggesting the primacy of the former over the latter.

Ferishtah, the fictional Arabian sage and a fairly transparent mouthpiece for the elder poet’s ideas, provides arguably the most direct expression of this distinction between intelligence

as but a means, and love as the end itself—an end accessible to minds of all girths.²⁶ To a disciple's inquiries in "A Pillar at Sebzevar" (1884) he responds, "Knowledge the golden? – lacquered ignorance! / As gain – mistrust it! Not as means to gain" (ll.15-16), adding "Wholly distrust thy knowledge . . . and trust / As wholly love allied to ignorance! / There lies thy truth and safety" (ll.64-66). Ferishtah approaches the very doorstep of intellectual disability studies when he chooses to praise "The small . . . [who] sees and knows / No more than brain accepts in faith of sight, / [and who] Takes first what comes first, only sure so far" (ll.71-75). Like the unnamed Bactrian of "A Death in the Desert" and those with developmental disabilities, the "small" of whom he speaks apparently recognizes and responds only to life's most fundamental, obvious stimuli, blissfully unaware of their complicated layers and vicissitudes: "more wisely ignorance / Restricts its apprehension" (ll.72-73). Apparently, some of those with limited knowledge and limited cognitive muscles possess a focus that provides an unobstructed vision of love made perfect in community, an enviable kind of single-mindedness.

A number of Browning's other poems situate such intimations of intellectual disability amid a larger consideration of disability issues in general, suggesting a surprising correspondence of experience between those of egregiously dissimilar physical and mental circumstances. In "James Lee's Wife" (1864), a series of short poems published after the death of EBB, Browning briefly equates the circumstances of "minds . . . [both] level and low . . . burnt and bare," marking them as similarly susceptible to "Love settling unawares" (ll. 147-51). A decade later, having lost yet another dear companion, he casts able-bodied and disabled alike as laboring under the same heavy thumb of circumstance. In "La Saisiaz" he laments, "Fair or foul the lot apportioned life on earth, we bear alike. / Stalwart body idly yoked to stunted spirit, powers, that fain / Else would soar, condemned to grovel, groundlings through the fleshly chain .

. .” (ll. 198-200). Browning’s cryptic description of the “stalwart body” with “stunted spirit” and the “groundlings through the fleshly chain” with whom he commiserates suggests—in a typical confluence of material and mental circumstances—a range of various sufferings, a unity of experience which might well encompass the lame, the able-bodied with intellectual limitations, the depressed, and the unlucky in love.

That Browning allows for such ambiguity suggests once more an inclination to blur those constructed boundaries which too completely demarcate and separate various kinds of human difference and imperfection. The Greek philosopher and artist of “Cleon” (1855) actually claims that “[I]mperfection means perfection hid” (l. 185), an ironic aphorism which gains wider significance when elaborated in “Deaf and Dumb” (1864), a germane poem short enough to reproduce here in full:

Only the prism’s obstruction shows aright
The secret of a sunbeam, breaks its light
Into the jeweled bow from blankest white,
So may a glory from defect arise:

Only by Deafness may the vexed Love wreak
Its insuppressive sense on brow and cheek,
Only by Dumbness adequately speak
As favoured mouth could never, through the eyes.

In addition to reminding us once more of language’s limitations, this response to Thomas Woolner’s sculpture of two mute and hearing impaired children upends the whole notion of *disability*, suggesting that those with limited sensation or functioning find richer stimulation in the skills left them than those retaining full use of all their faculties. Limitations in mind or body inspire creative solutions. The blind and the mad also receive Browning’s sympathetic treatment in the collection *Parleyings of Certain People of Importance in Their Day* (1887), which introduces the temporarily insane writer Christopher Smart, as well as the blinded Gerard de

Lairess, whose “sealed sense moved [his] mind, / Free from obstruction, to compassionate / Art’s power left powerless, and supply the blind / With fancies worth all facts denied by fate” (ll. 88-91). Clearly, Browning prefers presenting those with disabilities as *uniquely gifted* members of society to dismissing them as cursed members of a lower order.

Character as Critique

Having considered Browning’s displeasure with systems of discrimination—and his solidarity with the intellectually and physically disabled as well as those disenfranchised by class or race—we can turn to the specific means by which he challenges the use of native intelligence as a measure of one’s real worth. He relies in part on his heroes to do this work, those like Paracelsus who suggests that very little separates the able-minded from the intellectually disabled, the “high” from the “low.” As Paracelsus sees it, both prove viable vessels for truth:

‘[M]ay not truth be lodged alike in all,
The lowest as the highest? some slight film
The interposing bar which binds a soul
And makes the idiot, just as makes the sage
Some film removed, the happy outlet whence
Truth issues proudly?’ (ll. 754-59)

Various narrators’ figures of speech also begin to blur distinctions between the able-minded and intellectually disabled, introducing all sorts of slippage into accepted cognitive categories by suggesting—if fleetingly, indirectly, and through metaphor—the rather permeable nature of those constructed boundaries meant to separate intellectual disability, mental illness, and normal cognition. There is a playfulness at work here, a deft practice of relying on so as to destabilize prejudices against the cognitively disabled “other.” The narrator of “The Inn Album” (1875) suggests a kind of conceptual bridge between intellectual disability and philosophical inspiration when he describes the protagonist’s features in a moment of epiphany as betraying “half the

idiot's stare / And half the prophet's insight" (ll. 2968-69). The hero of "Paracelsus," referring to himself in the third person as he narrates his recent, failed journey towards knowledge, claims the little he has achieved could slip "'In the blank space 'twixt an idiot's gibber / And a mad lover's ditty'" (2.35-36). While this second passage seems to reify prejudices against the idiot's difficulties with language in the same way that the first references the idiot's lapsed attention, Paracelsus's trope also hints at a democratic continuum of sorts that connects instead of separating different types of cognitive dysfunction. Similarly, the narrator of "Sordello" describes his hero—much like the later Christopher Smart—as moving fluidly between neighboring mental states, Sordello's own brand of brainsickness retaining "a sort of consciousness / Under the imbecility" (3.62-63).

The primary evidence that Browning condemns hierarchies of mind, however, lies in the mouths of those unpleasant characters who employ them. Of course, arguing in this way that Browning actually challenges any one idea, or that he would gradually lead us to either judge or exonerate the dramatic character who articulates it, requires recognizing up front a chorus of scholars who claim Browning's ambiguity of characterization and ideology as his greatest strength. The related assertion of Browning's relativism usually roots itself in frequently anthologized poems which privilege ambiguity and adhere to Keatsian negative capability, largely dodging those works which commit what Browning's American contemporary Edgar Allan Poe condemned as the *heresy of the didactic*.²⁷ Modern critics often cite the delightfully mischievous narrator of "Fra Lippo Lippi" (1855), one whose licentious behavior and breaking of monastic vows appear to be offset by his Browningsque espousal of realism and beauty in art, as the example *par excellence* of such equivocation. Two representative critical voices provide clear signposts for this argument.

In chapter two of his seminal *The Poetry of Experience* (1957), Robert Langbaum claims that Browning's dramatic monologues hinge on the *sympathy* they reliably evoke in the reader who is drawn inexorably into the same perspective inhabited by the speaker, that the blatantly misogynist, ruthless duke of "My Last Duchess" (1842) and the self-absorbed, virtually solipsistic antinomian of "Johannes Agricola in Meditation" (1842) ultimately dodge our judgment and even win our esteem. This they accomplish by demanding admiration for their decisive action and self-assuredness, and by demonstrating the amorality—not the immorality—of their behavior. Browning, Langbaum explains, "psychologized and historicized" any implied judgment so as to encourage the suspension of such pointed evaluation (107). The murderous narrator of "Porphyria's Lover" (1842) likewise receives absolution by reason of madness, and the defense of Blougram from "Bishop Blougram's Apology" (1855) presumably rests on the successful *completion* of his sustained argument: "The point of the poem is that Blougram makes his case, even if on inappropriate grounds" (101). Langbaum really tasks reason when he concludes that the openly adulterous Don Juan figure of "Fifine at the Fair" (1872) and the absurdly passive, Napoleon III-like ruler of "Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau: Saviour of Society" should escape censure.

In the more recent *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics and Politics* (1993), Isobel Armstrong introduces the related concept of *struggle* and maintains that the "play of ambiguity and contradiction" in Browning's dramatic monologues—one example of a Victorian species she labels "double poems"—generates in the reader opposing attractions towards both "a text's stated project and the polysemic and possibly wayward meanings it generates" (10). In Browning, she finds that meaning "shifts and lurches almost vertiginously . . . coalescing syntax and semantic openness is the norm" (12). The skeptical double poem, she argues, not only draws

attention to its construction within and relation to a particular cultural moment (13), but its inherent ambiguities effectively prevent any overtly metaphysical or ethical readings: “the double poem signifies a godless, non-teleological world because as soon as two readings become possible and necessary, the permanent and universal categories of the ‘type’ dissolve” (16).

Effectively challenging these established authorities who insist on Browning’s relativism requires immediately moving into Browning’s ménage of characters and closely considering representative illustrations from the many poems abandoned to the literary graveyard, as well as citing examples from his canonized works. Such figures will, in the tradition of William Morris’s Guenevere and Browning’s own Pacchiarotto and Aristophanes, convict themselves. Mr. Sludge, Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau, an unnamed female from “The Inn Album,” and L. Miranda’s greedy cousins in “Red Cotton Night-Cap Country, or Turf and Towers” each employ defective reasoning, relying on prejudiced systems contingent on intellectual difference as well as social position.

A first, quick example of condescending *hierarchies of mind* emerges from the morally ambiguous, unnamed heroine of “The Inn Album,” whose status as victim of a past seduction evokes pity, while her apparent willingness to abandon a faithful and kind spouse prompts at least our temporary distaste. Her present dissatisfaction with a humble life and a pious husband who has failed to recognize her “value” (l. 1671), instead encouraging her direct contact with crowds of the needy, leads her to describe as degenerate, bestial, and idiot-like the rural, uneducated poor with whom the pair daily work:

‘These four years I have died away
In village-life. The village? Ugliness
At best and filthiness at worst . . .
. . . .
The life? I teach the poor and learn, myself,
That commonplace to such stupidity

Is all-recondite. Being brutalized
Their true need is brute-language, cheery grunts
And kindly cluckings, no articulate
Nonsense that's elsewhere knowledge. Tend the sick
Sickened myself at pig-perversity,
Cat-craft, dog-snarling, - may be, snapping . . .'
(ll. 1672-84)

A dearth of personal altruism mixes with intense class-consciousness and personal pride to produce this fear of idiot-like ignorance, ignorance she likens to a contagion. She fears that if exposure continues, she may herself assume “‘beast-nature, look and voice, / And, much more, thought, for beasts think’” (ll. 1699-1700).

A more extended picture of cognitive caste emerges in “Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau: Saviour of Society,” which criticizes the French Emperor Napoleon III’s failure to act more decisively in pursuing Italian independence. Browning, an advocate for personal dueling and a supporter of the frequently violent Italian Risorgimento, was irritated by a leader whose decision to keep the peace and maintain the status quo rested on a plea of personal weakness.²⁸ In his reverie, Hohenstiel claims that though part of him may “want to do a good thing” (l.81), the rest of him must recognize that “varied modes of creatureship abound” (l. 179). His own nature, he claims, is ultimately that of a “A conservator . . . Not a creator nor destroyer” (ll. 298-99). The pursuit of difficult goals he leaves to others, preferring “to use the thing I find, / Rather than strive at unfound novelty: / I make the best of the old, nor try for new” (ll. 266-68). God created him, he maintains, not to bring about that Italian independence for which the Brownings and their Italian neighbors longed, but merely to prevent further disintegration and perhaps simplify the business for the leader who will follow him, the “genius’s self / Destined to come and change things thoroughly” (ll. 404-6).

One need not recognize Browning's own frustration with the emperor (recently exiled to England when the poem appeared) to identify the poem's sustained critique of the former ruler's claims to intellectual and temperamental ineptitude, claims Hohenstiel makes to excuse his passivity. Contemporary reviewers unable to find in the poem a clearly demarcated attitude towards the protagonist must have misread the ironic subtitle, missed both Hohenstiel's frequent hedging and his extremely redundant rationalizations, and failed to read through to the conclusion and its rather direct commentary on Hohenstiel's defense.²⁹

“[W]here one ceases to soliloquize,
Somehow the motives, that did well enough
I' the darkness, when you bring them into light
Are found, like those famed cave-fish, to lack eye
And organ for the upper magnitudes.” (ll. 2106-9)

The narrative voice dominating this latter section of the poem repeatedly lambastes the leader, “so resolute before” (l. 1519), for worshipping “that prince o’ the power o’ the air / Who . . . bids his votaries . . . Feed on a lie” (ll. 2120-23). Just in case the reader has missed the implied judgment, the narrator provides a concise, direct one: “Hohenstiel / Will have to pay the price, in God’s good time . . .” (ll. 1539-40). If only he had “by preclusive trumpet-blast, / Signified ‘Truth and Justice . . . to come . . . Thus moral suasion heralding brute force,’” then Italy would have “seen the old abuses die, / And new life kindle here, there, everywhere” (ll. 1576-85). Obviously, Browning demands that the reader interrogate both Hohenstiel’s behavior and the perspectives informing it.

Though exhibiting a considerably more modest sense of his own intellectual powers than did the heroine of “The Inn Album,” Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau betrays the same faulty reliance on comparison-driven hierarchies of brainpower. Where his predecessor uses such reasoning to defend her impending actions, Hohenstiel-Schwangau employs such biases to

justify his *inaction*. Robert Langbaum's contention that the poem fails because "no outline of character emerges from the intricacy of the argument"—he also admits and dislikes Browning's obvious judgment against this protagonist—ignores Browning's minutely detailing Hohenstiel's pitifully weak, incessant attempts at self-justification.³⁰ With the tired redundancy of one trying to convince himself as much as his audience, Hohenstiel-Schwangau grinds out a distinction between "great minds" and "small minds," claiming the latter size as his own. He presumably left grand modifications in national politics for a more able successor because to act more deliberately himself would have been to "thwart . . . God's purpose in creation. I conceive / No other duty possible to man, -- / Highest mind, lowest mind, -- no other law / By which to judge life failure or success" (ll.247-51). In this way he transfers responsibility for his passivity from himself to his creator, insisting on a divinely appointed, irrefutable hierarchy of mind that limits and otherwise predestines each individual's course of action: "There is no trial like the appropriate one / Of leaving little minds their liberty / Of littleness to blunder on through life . . . He schemed who made alike / Great minds and little minds, saw use for each" (ll.1289-1300).

The charlatan of "Mr. Sludge, the Medium" (1864) relies on similar hierarchies of mind as both inspiration and justification for his habitual obfuscation. The caught and cornered Mr. Sludge, a distillation of everything Browning disliked about the faddish spiritualists of the 1850s, employs a number of stratagems as he begs complicit silence from the customer who has caught him cheating during a séance. Sludge casts the rest of his clientele as a bunch of blockheads lacking the discrimination to catch him at his game; apparently, they *deserve* to be duped. One naïve customer, whom he fleeced so successfully that he lived the high life for a week afterwards, he confidentially describes as possessing only a "modicum of intelligence" (l.266). The auditor coddled by Sludge throughout the poem receives Sludge's derision too, though,

predictably, the medium waits until his accuser has left the room before calling him a “brute-beast” (l.1500). Sludge’s pompousness also appears when he injects false humility into his interminable discourse. In a deceptive bid to lay aside his pride and demonstrate his commonality with the rest of mankind, he claims he too has a “Defect somewhere [which] compénsates for success” (l. 1237). The problem is that his explanatory analogy unwittingly reveals the same, worn intellectual arrogance. He slightly compares his mix of cowardice and gratifying mental acumen to a “big-legged fellow” with “little arm / And a less brain, though big legs win the race” (ll. 1239-40). This swindler’s attempts to condescend prove as transparent as his efforts at sleight of hand.

Arguably the most malicious, blatant cataloguing of intellectual hierarchy in Browning’s oeuvre emerges from one of his least-known works, one touched on by neither Langbaum nor Armstrong. “Red Cotton Night-Cap Country” relates the tragic tale of a contemporary of Browning’s, a telling enriched by the narrator’s determination to disabuse his auditor of her conviction that nothing “red” and rash has happened in the peaceful “white” countryside through which they walk in the poem’s opening. As he enlightens her with an account of love, deception, greed, and sudden death, he blends into the narrative his own creative suppositions concerning the characters’ motives and individual endgames.

As rendered by Browning, the story reads like a farce turned tragedy. Upon inheriting a great fortune, Léonce Miranda abandons the piety of his youth and lives to “tickle sense” until an encounter with the beautiful Clara de Millefleurs interrupts his course, upending his estimation of women as mere “sport” in which “[c]heating is lawful chase” (ll. 1401, 1392, 1399). Overwhelmed by a new manner of love that the narrator assures us “was true” (l. 1487), Miranda takes his beloved to his estate, away from the emotionally abusive husband who divorces her,

and away from his own disapproving mother. For the next twenty years Miranda lives at Clairvaux, spending his time on both Clara and a renewed devotion to the local, enshrined icon called the *Ravissante*. He spends his money rebuilding his estate and constructing a central tower from which he can see the nearby statue of the Virgin, a tower from which he will later, fatally fall. Tragedy first interrupts this idyllic life, however, when his mother dies two months after reiterating her disapproval of his romantic situation: remorse and guilt take over for a time, driving him to attempt drowning for abandoning his mother and then, in a reversal, prompting him to burn off his hands in penance for abandoning Clara during his initial round of guilt. His greedy cousins, whose machinations helped spark all this intense guilt and self-mutilation, purchase the jeweler business left Miranda by his father and disappear until Miranda's death. In the meantime, Miranda's superstitious attachment to the *Ravissante* and his faith in the money-hungry "Father of the Mission, Parish-priest" and "Mother of the convent" convince him he need not leave the unholy union with Clara if he will only give freely and liberally (ll. 3030-31). Soon after, Miranda's corpse lies at the tower's foot and the cousins promptly reappear, "like calm determined crows" (l. 3728).

The narrator believes Miranda deliberately stepped off the height in the tale's climax not because of madness or suicidal tendencies, but under the impulse of a fanatical faith in the Virgin Mary, who "ravish[es] men away / From puny aches and petty gains" (ll. 3386-87). Specifically, and of lethal significance, the narrator claims Miranda has convinced himself that the Virgin will draw him to her through the air, thereby signaling her approval of his love for Clara. After such miraculous intervention, he plans to marry his beloved.

In a mercenary ploy to acquire the deceased's property before it lands in the hands of La *Ravissante*, the cousins describe Miranda's mind as compromised, his will and testament

accordingly null and void. As Clara bitterly apostrophizes, ““You only have to die, and they detect, / In all you said and did, insanity! / Your faith was fetish-worship, your regard / For Christ’s prime precept which endows the poor . . . a craze from first to last!”” (ll. 3881-85). The cousins explain Miranda’s recent actions as evidence of a steadily declining mind. Not only do they err—the narrator assures us that Miranda was *not* mad (ll. 3603-9)—they assume just the kind of rigid hierarchy of mind that Browning enjoys exploding. As they would have it, once an individual begins this particular descent, momentum pulls one inexorably downward.

‘Body and mind, at last the man gave way.
His body – there it lies, what part was left
Unmutilated! for, the strife commenced
Two years ago, when, both hands burnt to ash,
- A branch broke loose, by loss of what choice twigs!
As for his mind – behold our register
Of all its moods, from the incipient mad,
Nay, mere erratic, to the stark insane,
Absolute idiocy or what is worse!
All have we catalogued . . .
Brief, the man was mad.
We are his heirs and claim our heritage.’ (ll. 3774-3797)

The ““register”” of mind upon which the speaking cousin relies proves doubly suspect. First of all, the cousins have already demonstrated a willingness to say or do anything to achieve their ends; therefore, their every word demands close interrogation. At this juncture, they maintain Miranda was mad in a transparent effort to disenfranchise Clara and lay hold of Miranda’s land and money. Second, the narrator has directly rejected the idea that such deterioration of mind actually occurs in Miranda’s case, despite the insistence of cousins and assorted bystanders. As the narrator constructs character and events, Miranda’s actions follow predictably from a life experience rooted early, earnestly, in superstition:

Such being the conditions of his life,
Such end of life was not irrational.
Hold a belief, you only half-believe,

With all-momentous issues either way, --
And I advise you imitate this leap,
Put faith to proof . . . (ll. 3604-9)

And yet, though predictable, his end was not inevitable. The narrator compellingly argues that parentage and culture did not plot Miranda's course for him, nor his own particular measure of mind prevent his acting more wisely. As with Hohenstiel-Schwangau, so with Miranda: destiny did not enforce categorization on them and file away their futures as foregone conclusions. In fact, since the beginning of "Red Cotton Night-Cap Country," the problematics of categorization itself have interested the narrator. In the framing monologue preceding the main tale, he considers the local Fiddle-Show and the "duly catalogued / Achievements" (ll. 255-56) on display there. Though undoubtedly "we profit by the catalogue," the narrator suggests that something eludes the quick glance that "close review" would unveil (ll. 292, 299). He spends the remainder of the poem's first thousand lines trying to explode his female auditor's casual, categorical assessment of the countryside as "white" and domestically peaceful. This comfortable "cotton night-cap country" is also, he declares, "red" with intrigue and flashes of violence, an argument he attempts to prove with the narrative which follows. Towards the primary story's conclusion, the man the cousins "'pronounce imbecile'" (l. 3943) receives a very different, more nuanced appraisal from the narrator. This storyteller willing recognizes both Miranda's successes and his failures. To the narrator's mind, "Miranda hardly did his best with life;" if he had merely "opened eye, [and] exerted brain," he would have better understood relations between the sexes and been smarter about the wisdom of testing God's readiness to intervene supernaturally upon request (ll. 3998-4007). "The heart was wise according to its lights / And limits; but the head refused more sun, / And shrank into its mew and craved less space" (ll. 4010-12). Environment shaped but did not bake the mold of Miranda's mind: he

shoved it in the oven himself. The didactic narrator takes the Browningsque maxim from “Andrea del Sarto” (1855)—“a man’s reach should exceed his grasp” (l.97)—recasts it in terms of mind, then expands it beyond its original import: “Success is naught, endeavour’s all. / But intellect adjusts the means to ends, / Tries the low thing, and leaves it done, at least; / No prejudice to high thing, intellect / Would do and will do, only give the means” (ll. 4019-23). Degree of mental acuity and the relative difficulty of what a given mind attempts apparently matter less than that each mind strives and achieves *something*. The narrator endorses an egalitarianism of mutual striving over the employment of divisive categorizations of mind.

In contradistinction to popular assertions about Browningsque equivocation, then, much of Browning’s corpus does swing hard in one direction. Most of his poems contend that each individual retains the ability to choose, regardless of the relative capacity or “balance” of his mind. The existence of *choice* upends the caprice of *fate*. Recognizing this tendency in Browning’s work uncovers one plausible explanation for why two poems from *Dramatic Monologues and Lyrics* (1842), originally grouped under the title “Madhouse Cells,” were later separated and renamed “Porphyria’s Lover” and “Johannes Agricola in Meditation.” Read within the context of Browning’s other works and these suggestively more intimate titles, the two pieces invite attention as nuanced portraits of separate, eccentric personalities, more than they do as clinical case studies of comparable, incurable dementias.³¹ Browning preferred occupying himself with motivation and moral decision-making to classifying characters according to their physiological peculiarities. He was much more interested in considering the unique course by which individuals shape their own character, choose among available life courses, and defend their subsequent actions, than in joining society’s attempts to categorize individuals using superficial stereotypes based on defective criteria (such as hierarchies based on

“intellect”). The attributes of individual minds that most arrested Browning’s attention included their malleability, their endless potential for virtue or vice, and their contribution to relationship construction or fragmentation. At the same time, Browning unambiguously asserted an array of communal values, emphasizing acts of cooperation, romantic passion, and altruism. In questioning the pedestrian, divisive use of theorized categories of mental difference, Browning was expanding his vision of a radically inclusive community, one that would refuse social discriminations rooted in intellectual—or any other kind of native—difference.

Categorical Transformations: From Medical Marker to Moralizing Metaphor

Browning’s impatience with those who abuse hierarchies of mind manifests itself not only in the larger ideas performed by his characters, but in their very language—their diction and metaphorical practice. A character’s routine use of tropes grounded in notions of disability provides yet another reliable means by which to take his or her measure. More specifically, the ends towards which one deploys words like “blind,” “fool,” and “idiot” tend to reveal something essential about that character’s quality.

In their groundbreaking work in the 1980s, cognitive linguists George Lakoff and Mark Johnson traced the roots of common metaphors back to human experience, particularly spatial or “orientational” experience.³² For instance, the tendency to unconsciously describe one’s emotional state as “up” and “high,” or perhaps “down” and “low,” can be explained by the most long-standing, undeniable facts about our physical orientation in a material world. The reasons “up” often denotes positive associations and “down” negative can, presumably, be located in our tendency to accomplish more while standing up than lying down, the physical reality that moving up takes effort, while moving downwards requires little more than a submission to

gravity. Life-giving warmth and rain come from above, while the grave and all kinds of death-dealing sites and entities lie in wait just beneath us. In the same vein, those ubiquitous combat metaphors that permeate our discussion of business, sports, and professional advancement can be traced back to earlier eras' daily struggles for survival in a physically hostile environment.

Lakoff and Johnson maintain that such metaphors emerge from but also reflexively shape human experience and perception. Metaphors that draw on combat and war, for instance, reflect society's old preoccupation with conflict and, in turn, perpetuate that preoccupation by keeping violent constructs and tropes on the tips of our tongues and the frontal lobes of our brains.

I would like to extend their conclusions about bodily experience to encompass sustained *intellectual* stereotyping. Other popular metaphors found in the English language have emerged less from embodied events occurring in three-dimensional space than from culturally generated and managed constructs which lack such easily measurable, corporeal referents. Investigations into cognitive capacity, for instance, cannot be easily traced to physiological make-up. The flexibility of an individual "intelligence" across time and changing physiological conditions is as variable as the thousands of therapeutic and educational tools by which contemporary societies measure the construct. Even if intelligence *were* a stable quality, precise measurement of a given person's intellect would remain unattainable. While technology improvements tell us more about the activity and capacity of various minds than did, say, nineteenth-century phrenology or Galton's absurd method of cross-referencing old biographies, even today's C.A.T. scans and M.R.I.s cannot provide definitive measurements of that inestimable human quality. In its own way, "intelligence" provides an enigma similar to that offered by "soul."

The difference is, while western society grew uncomfortable with making strong claims about a spiritual dimension of human experience during the Victorian period, we also learned to

traffic in ostensibly reliable measures of cognitive ability as a matter of course, unquestioningly relying on artificial yardsticks to determine the limits of the individual brain. Determined to find and reify difference instead of congruence—a seemingly pragmatic evil demanded by professional and economic laws of supply and demand—this system of assessing worth determines relative values for a set of measurable traits and then generalizes outwards from this limited schema to determine whether someone is appropriate for certain professional opportunities. In the hands of some, the measurement and attribution of intellect becomes a project of identity formation which squeezes an entire person into the confines of a single, delimiting marker such as “genius” or “idiot,” markers we have learned to bandy about metaphorically without much regard for the material imprint they leave on their targets. As Avital Ronell notes “stupidity as an act of naming commits barely traceable acts of ethnocide.”³³ In the same way that the polarizing usage of “black” and “white,” “he” and “she,” and “rich” and “poor” can be traced back to historically prevalent racial, gendered, and socio-economic prejudices, so can the figurative employment of words like “imbecile,” “blind,” and “fool” be linked to equally pernicious assumptions of absolute (perceptual and cognitive) difference. As I noted in the introduction, the shared figurative language we use to describe intellectual acumen, moral wisdom, and common sense echoes a largely unchallenged, *constructed* lexicon denoting separate degrees of native intelligence.

Browning employs several strategies to interrogate the disunifying use of metaphoric language rooted in notions of the physically and intellectually disabled “other.” One of these strategies involves, ironically, his extremely *frequent* use of such terms. Words denoting sensory or communicative disabilities, such as “blind” and “deaf,” or “dumb” and “mute,” populate virtually all of Browning’s poems, serving a number of specific functions. Most obviously,

perhaps, their hyperbolic use helps Browning (or any other poet) to dramatize action, sharpen speech and description, and to convey quickly and easily a character's circumstances, opinions, or actions. To more forcefully put off his critics, Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau declares "I am *deaf*" (l. 414); the enraptured Queen of "In a Balcony" (1855) claims sudden romance has made her "*Mute, passive*" (l. 563); the narrator of "How it Strikes a Contemporary" (1855) describes the mysterious poet's old dog as remarkably like his master, "bald and *blindish*" (l. 12); and the narrator of "Christmas-Eve" (1850) depicts himself as "Stumbling, *mute-mazed*" (l. 1219) until appropriated by a loving God. Such bilabial alliteration as that in these last two examples adds a kind of percussive force to Brownian dialogue and description. "[M]ute-mazed," in particular, points to one of Browning's favorite devices. In just a handful of poems from the early 1870s, one finds "mute-marching," "mute as mouse," "mutely make," "mutely merged," "mutely might," and "Mute marble."³⁴ Other, kindred tropes are used to similar aural effect. "The Flight of the Duchess" (1845) contains a "*Duke, dumb*-stricken with amazement" at his weary wife's resolve (l. 309); Don Juan of "Fifine at the Fair" (1872) casts the ancient Greeks as but a "*blind / and blundering* race" under the perverse thumb of the gods (ll. 312-13); Paracelsus passionately criticizes his own, earlier stooping to "envy and hate, / *Blind* opposition, *brutal* prejudice, / *Bald* ignorance" (5.354-56); and Hohenstiel defensively explains the political machine as a series of parts, "Each *blind* to aught *beside* its little *bent*" (l. 468).

The frequency with which Browning uses such words cannot be overstated, but it can be more fully understood. These words accomplish more than memorable, acoustic effects. One might argue that Browning deliberately overworks such words to achieve specific ethical ends, that their ubiquity in his poems works to dull their derisive edge and tame their literal, fragmenting associations. After all, when so many characters wear the labels "blind" and

“mute,” the terms themselves become less a marker of difference than of commonality.³⁵ And, as is self-evident, they begin to signify less a rooted, genetic condition only occasionally present in the population, and serve more to describe any given individual’s current emotional, spiritual, or psychological state of being. Though Browning does occasionally employ such terms literally as well as figuratively, their omnipresence in his work combines with their traditional multivalence to soften distinctions between the real and metaphoric. A century before political correctness discouraged casual use of these terms to denote real, physical conditions, Browning was systematically privileging their employment as tropes, particularly when it came to describing his characters’ moral or emotional obtuseness, wrong-mindedness, or ignorance.

When Robert was still a child, his mother reprimanded him for overusing another term commonly deployed to indicate real disabilities or, alternatively, to inscribe moral condemnation: “fool.”³⁶ This word, a staple in every Browning poem of any length, advances a by-now familiar linguistic project. Historically, this term has increasingly denoted what the *Oxford English Dictionary* describes as “One deficient in judgement or sense,” moving away from the more literal designations of professional jester or born idiot.³⁷ The latter use did still appear in Browning’s era from time to time. Emily Brontë’s Heathcliff, for instance, revels in his success at shaping young Hareton into a brute because he knows the child has no genetic predisposition towards intellectual disability: “““If he were a born fool I should not enjoy it half so much””” (168). Browning’s own practice represents a culmination of the shift *away* from such medical markers towards metaphor. One would be hard-pressed to find, among the hundreds of times he uses this word throughout his oeuvre, an instance where the term denotes a congenital intellectual deficiency. The word almost always appears in order to indicate a judgment of perspective, motivation, or behavior. Arrogant characters employ this word to

convey disdain: Sludge deprecates “the fools, the folk / Who came to see . . .” (ll. 348-49) and the villainous Duke of “The Flight of the Duchess” considers giving his “foolish,” ungovernable wife over to a gypsy witch for behavior modification (l. 431). More sympathetic personalities and narrators use the word to indicate a failure of perception or action. Such failure could be their own, as when the female narrator of “A Woman’s Last Word” (1855) scolds her “foolish” self for being overly contentious and weepy with her lover (l. 38), or when the male narrator of “Too Late” (1864) calls himself a “fool” for daring to love without acting decisively to claim the object of his adoration (l. 76). Or, the failure might lie in another—in Fra Lippo Lippi’s fellow monks, “the fools” (l. 335) who piously scratch out his realistic renderings of human flesh; in lovers like Constance of “In a Balcony” (1855), whom Norbert calls “foolish” for attempting to woo him for her Queen instead of herself (l. 778); or in sages like the narrator of “Rabbi Ben Ezra” (1864), who calls “Fools!” those who live in the moment without regard for the eternal consequences of their actions (l. 157). The speed and ease with which Browning’s characters put this term to very different uses becomes evident within single poems, such as “Aristophanes’ Apology” (1875). Aristophanes calls Balaustion and his larger, less astute audience “fools . . . fools . . . fools,” while Balaustion bemoans Aristophanes’ artistic dissipation—his privileging of absurdity over instruction—with the claim, “fooling licensed you” (ll. 1649-50, 3306). In the space of two lines, the Duke of “The Statue and the Bust” (1855) demonstrates even more rapidly the term’s very different applications. Attempting to decide who is more the fool—himself for failing to act immediately to claim the love of an engaged woman he has just fallen for, or the woman’s cold, unfeeling fiancé whom the Duke believes ignorant of her ripening affection for himself—he reflects schizophrenically, “fool -- / Or I am the fool . . .” (ll. 110-11).³⁸

Unlike “fool,” the terms “simpleton,” “imbecile,” and “idiot” retained strong associations with the concept of congenitally determined intellectual deficiency across the nineteenth century, serving as medical markers of incrementally more severe developmental disability. “Simpleton” referred to higher-functioning but often dangerously naïve individuals unable to assimilate knowledge and skills as quickly as others; “imbecile” indicated those who could protect themselves from obvious hazards but who remained incapable of managing their own affairs; and “idiot” described the most extreme cases of mental deficiency, those unable to guard themselves against common dangers such as fire or water.

Browning does occasionally suggest the nineteenth-century medical significations of these terms to indicate individuals with varying degrees of cognitive disability. He still manages, however, to dodge the unambiguous reification of a *congenital* intellectual hierarchy. In describing the masses whose social woes can be lightened by Sordello’s lyrical talents, the poem’s obtrusive narrator describes the locals as “rabble . . . ludicrous in their patience,” a group which includes “poor reckless soldiery” and an “idiot” who wriggles about the soldiers’ feet begging for food (5.262-72). Apparently, the idiot wriggles because he cannot walk: his limbs were all lopped off at some previous point, and it remains unclear whether this gross trauma caused or resulted from others’ treatment of his severe intellectual deficiency. Similarly, Onofrio of “The Cenciaja” (1876) finds his “mind / *Grown imbecile* by darkness, solitude” (ll. 190-91, my emphasis), locked in prison indefinitely following the false accusations of a vengeful cardinal. His mind gradually “fatigued away” by incarceration, he unwittingly admits that he might somehow be complicit in a murder of which, it is quite obvious, he could have known nothing (ll. 190-203).

These two literal examples comprise the most infrequent exceptions. Browning does little to reinforce the stratifying classification of intellectual difference. Overwhelmingly, he employs these terms metaphorically, placing them in the mouths of figures who assess character traits he considers more fundamental than cognitive disability, characteristics like the way one exercises artistic talent, or the degree of balance s/he maintains between material and spiritual concerns. In other words, RB uses tropes like “idiot” and “simpleton” to take the measure of characters’ moral, not intellectual, aptitude. Voices with whom the reader is made to sympathize use these terms to assess character—a measure of worth Browning transparently respects—while more suspect individuals rely on these words primarily when shredding another’s reputation.

A number of Browning’s characters and narrators draw on a clearly defined ethical sense as they consider the questionable actions executed in their field of vision. Balaustion, who voices Browning’s own preference for the more serious works of Euripides over those of Aristophanes, criticizes the latter playwright in “Aristophanes’ Apology” for his plays’ highly inconsistent attitude towards war, comparing him to an “imbecile [who] has dared to formulate / ‘Love war, hate peace, become a litigant!’” (ll. 3058-59). The narrator of “Sordello” criticizes his own poem’s central figure for similar artistic frivolity, describing Sordello as naively wearing an ““idiot-smile”” before he realizes his professional responsibility to do more than just entertain his audience (4.289-90). And since, for Browning, art and all other elements of material experience are never only ends in themselves, it comes as no surprise that other voices in his theatre launch these hot tropes to reproach those who refuse to peer beyond the veil of empiricism. In “Shah Abbas” (1884), one of Ferishtah’s wiser disciples labels those who fail to value the heart above the head ““simpletons”” (ll. 129-39). The narrator of “Christmas-Eve” (1850), a poem which articulates Browning’s spiritual beliefs at least as directly as *Ferishtah’s*

Fancies does, marks as “[p]oor idiots” those who choose present pleasure over hope in the life to come (ll. 292-308), and describes those who allow love to move them beyond a dependence on reason, writing, and art as having left “the blessed imbecility / scrawled” for “Love . . . the all-sufficient” (ll. 662-63, 688).

Not that Browning’s privileged voices always direct these terms well away from themselves. Browning values Socratic self-knowledge and, accordingly, sometimes illustrates the strength of an endorsed character by the degree to which s/he recognizes shortcomings closer to home. Paracelsus, after a nine-year effort to perfect his intellect far from communion with his fellow man, concludes that what he has gained distinguishes him little from anyone else: “the whole [could be] / Slipt in the blank space ‘twixt an idiot’s gibber / And a mad lover’s ditty” (2.34-36). The accumulation of knowledge has failed to raise him above even that institutionalized population conventionally pushed to the bottom of the barrel. Instead, his quest has revealed the qualities and limitations he shares with all humanity. Paul, one of the poets portrayed in “The Two Poets of Croisic” (1878), similarly recognizes his own talent as that of a “simpleton,” this in spite of his success turning his literary works into bestsellers by marketing them as his sister’s creations for a novelty-seeking public (l. 976). Even when a character’s epiphany proves erroneous—as Léonce fatally discovers right after informing the Ravissante Virgin that he has been a “simpleton” for not stepping out on his faith earlier—this willingness to claim responsibility for one’s unsatisfactory life raises the hero above his peers, those like Léonce’s materialistic cousins and his self-centered mother (l. 3487).

As before, dubious characters like Léonce’s relatives disparage others by means of concentrated condescension. The hierarchies of mind upon which they rely spew out related metaphors like “imbecile” at a high rate, a practice Clara deprecates amidst the cousins’ repeated

efforts to “pronounce imbecile” the deceased kinsman whose money they crave (l. 3943). Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau’s failed conscience, “Sagacity,” soothingly employs the same label, echoing Hohenstiel’s opinion that in maintaining the status quo, he “out-king[s] all the kingly imbeciles” (l. 1927). And the confused, neophyte songwriter Sordello—still unaware of his art’s social obligations and riding high on his popular success—considers everyone “imbecile” who does not, like him, pare down a song’s story to its important essentials (2.135). Mr. Sludge exploits the entire tropal gamut, styling his clients “idiots,” mocking as both “fools” and “imbeciles” those who believe he could actually contact Milton, Locke, or Homer, and designating the whole of his clientele as “simpletons” who actually *want* to be fed lies (ll. 372, 586, 694, 713). The equally self-interested, deceptive old man of “The Inn Album” (1875), who seduced and left the poem’s young heroine four years earlier, deprecates *himself* as “idiot-like,” but not in a way that earns our sympathies; he tells his victim that he stupidly pushed her too hard and too fast and thus lost, not her love, but her money (l. 1492). Yet another victimizer, one of the cruel students who sets up the marriage trap for Jules in “Pippa Passes” (1841), deprecates a colleague’s recent poetic attempts by dismissing his cramped couplets as the work of a “simpleton” (l. 298). The poem’s much more ominous Uggocio Stefani (Monsignor’s intendant) attempts to butter up his master by distinguishing him from the “brutal dastardly idiot . . . your brother [whom] I / frightened to death,” doing so in an effort to involve his master in secret plans to murder Pippa, the poor spinner with legal rights to Monsignor’s estate (4.158-59). Such figurative practice does more than convey an appraisal of person: it shapes the speaker’s attitude towards the object of derision in a way that loosens his own sense of responsibility for or culpability in the other’s situation. Opinions expressed in such absolute terms become, in effect, solid barriers to community.

Condescending characters also apply these prejudicial terms to describe how they think *others* appraise *themselves*. Browning's complicated layering of voices makes attribution a bit tricky at times, but such shady characters appear to project into their critic's disapproving words that same demeaning terminology they would themselves employ in the other's place. That is, in none of these situations do we know that the tropes credited to a suspect character's critics were indeed employed by those critics; it seems just as likely that the arrogant, suspect characters showed no qualms about ascribing their own critical vocabulary to those individuals criticizing them. Bishop Blougram, for instance, disregards those whom he believes would judge his own easy complacency with life and his chosen faith as attributes of either "knave" or "fool," one "pin[ing] among [his] million imbeciles" (ll. 374-79). The unbelieving auditor of "Easter Day" (1850), another spiritually dubious character, uses the same defensive technique to put off what he presumes his opposition will label him. As he tells the narrator, he is no mindless entity who can be persuaded to do or believe anything, but one who requires solid proof before he will believe in the existence of divine law: "'What? Am I / An idiot, do you think . . .?'" (ll. 32-33). And Guido Franceschini of *The Ring and the Book*, arguably Browning's most infamous voice, apes others' criticism of him as a "'simpleton'" for not properly valuing (indeed, ultimately killing) his wife, the young woman whose reputation he works to blacken until moments before his own death (ll. 2115).

The Ring and the Book: Proof Par Excellence

The twelve-book poem which brings Guido to life, a masterpiece conspicuously absent from my discussion to this point, provides an excellent arena in which to rehearse Browning's intolerance of flawed classifications contingent on both ethically problematic systems of signification, and associated essentializations of racial and social—as well as

intellectual—difference. In contradistinction to Robert Langbaum's declaration that "social and religious absolutes are not the means for understanding the right and wrong of the poem" (113), the epic's matrix does invite application of values external to the poem itself, values that question the place of prejudice and propose alternative criteria for evaluating personhood. This sensational story tells and retells the story of young Pompilia, her flight from abuse with a helpful priest, and her untimely end. A total of nine peripheral and central characters relate the story's events, each narrative voice revealing the validity of his or her perspective in part by the degree to which s/he reifies or disregards certain criteria of human worth. Browning's own voice, which opens and concludes the work, provides cursory judgments of each character's perspective, but a more comprehensive picture of their relative reliability emerges as successive voices alternately fail or succeed in looking beyond false signs to the kind of signifieds espoused by Browning.

Browning's poem returns to familiar ground when the author makes a case for reanimating the dead "facts" of the tale—details he found in an old yellow book on a book stall in Florence—with his own artistic flourishes and emendations. Like the later narrator of "Red Cotton Night-Cap Country," this framing narrator freely admits injecting a different kind of truth (1.698-706) into the historical record: "Fancy with fact is just one fact the more" (1.465). He predicates this move on the assumption that "sense and sight" and "word" alike fail to deliver truth adequately (1.826, 837), a point he drives home in Book I by providing a detailed but erratic and confusingly swift overview of the tale. Discerning ears will successfully pick the subtle melody from out of Book I's narrative cacophony, however, an accomplishment similar to what will be required after completing the collection of disparate narratives which follow. Browning prepares the reader for the task by clarifying his indirect, creative approach: "Art may

tell a truth / Obliquely, do the thing shall breed the thought, / Nor wrong the thought . . .”

(12.859-61). Just as the making of Browning’s gold wedding ring involved the use of an alloy later burnt away from the finished product, so will this story combine history and imagination to shape the truth, “the thing signified” (1.32).

Browning’s poem echoes loudly with a rather familiar signified—ironic censure of the linguistic medium which makes the poem possible, what the Pope denounces as both “barren words / Which, more than any deed, characterize / Man as made subject to a curse” and “filthy rags of speech, this coil / Of statement, comment, query and response, / Tatters all too contaminate for use . . .” (10.349-51, 373-75). Guido’s spin-doctoring in Book V joins the similarly suspect renditions of Books II, III, IV, VIII, and IX in validating the Pope’s claim. The heroes of the tale, on the other hand, demonstrate a more cautious appreciation of language. Pompilia makes a sharp distinction between the ““foolish words”” supposedly sent her from Caponsacchi and the ““soul behind them . . . the pure strong wind, / Not dust and feathers which its breath may bear”” (7.1418-20), while Caponsacchi adds that, upon this first encounter with Pompilia, the two quickly saw through Guido’s machinations and understood one another completely before a single word had been uttered (6.872-77). Truth—the signified—emerged hard and bright from beneath the muck of conflicting signifiers: “As I / Recognized her, at potency of truth, / So she, by the crystalline soul, knew me, / Never mistook the signs” (6.931-34). Eyes communicate as much as the tongue here, carrying the same divine authority as Pompilia’s plaintive words (6.1010-15), and providing that part of the message to which Caponsacchi most readily responds: “Her soul intent on mine through two wide eyes. / I answered them” (6.1201-2). Book XII, which reintroduces Browning’s own voice, formalizes

the message with a short dissertation undermining the legitimacy of the forgotten, historical record, as well as Browning's own revivifying efforts:

So, British Public, who may like me yet,
(Marry and amen!) learn one lesson hence
Of many which whatever lives should teach:
This lesson, that our human speech is naught,
Our human testimony false, our fame
And human estimation words and wind. (12.835-40)

If Browning's own words, his "human speech" and "human testimony" remain suspect, however, this does not annul the passage's final, legitimate lines. In this poem, the poet has concerned himself with words' general unruliness, "'Man's speech being false'" (12.604), but also, more specifically, with how preoccupations with "fame" and faulty systems of "human estimation" and evaluation misshape the tool of language into a weapon that shatters human bonds.

The importance of shaping and sustaining such intimate connections constitutes one of Browning's usual signifieds. Guido Franceschini earns the reader's scorn, not only by demonstrating multifarious modes of social condescension, but by failing to cherish Pompilia, the wife he schemed to acquire. The Pope's judgment of Guido's character admits to no moral nuance: "Not one permissible impulse moves the man, / From the mere liking of the eye and ear, / To the true longing of the heart that loves, / No trace of these . . ." (10.537-40). Indeed, Guido disdains the very concept of *love*, unless it be that fleeting, hot attraction to a neighbor's wife or a friend's daughter (5.665-96). To his mind, marriage formalizes a politic, not affectionate, union; each wife should do as her husband instructs without concern about personal desires: "Pompilia's duty was—submit herself, / Afford me pleasure, perhaps cure my bile" (5.718-19). On Pompilia rests the responsibility to forge any happiness from the uncomfortable domestic situation in which she finds herself: Guido will expend no such effort (5.744-47). He lacks the kind of compassion Caponsacchi shows for Pompilia, an intense, sacrificial love which seeks her

well-being above his own. Whether this love contains a bit of romantic ardor, or whether Caponsacchi's enthusiastic service "of brain and heart and hand" (6.135) is, as he asserts, the consequence of "honest and permissible love / O' the good and true" (6.1816-17), Browning's preference is unambiguous: Caponsacchi's vigorous devotion provides the starkest foil for every other characters' neglect of the abused wife.³⁹ The Pope may censure Caponsacchi's "masquerade in sober day, with change / Of motley too" (10.1131-32), but he praises the young priest's "healthy rage,-- / When the first moan broke from the martyr-maid" (10.1038-39) and resolves that "In thought, word and deed . . . throughout all [his] warfare [he] wast pure" (10.1169-70). Pompilia, "God's gift of a purity of soul / That will not take pollution" (10.678-79), likewise earns the Pope's tribute for her efforts at improving relations with Guido by remaining "dutiful," "submissive," "tolerant" and "patient" as long as possible under her husband's abuse.⁴⁰

Pressing in on the dying Pompilia and grieving, angry Caponsacchi are their assorted contemporaries, those working to rupture community in any number of ways: Rome's local gossips, its self-absorbed lawyers, and Guido himself. Half-Rome, Guido's most ardent supporter, launches the storytelling with a narrative laced with that brand of prejudice most despised by Browning, one rooted in assumptions of women's intrinsic moral inferiority. This narrator's personal gripe with married women—starkly revealed at the end of Book II in an aside about his own wife—begins manifesting itself earlier in the distinctions he makes between pitiable men and conniving women. Pompilia's parents may share duty as "'uncommon fools'" (2.481), but the narrator marks Pietro's foolishness as that of an "ignorant" husband, a "dupe" taken advantage of by a conspiring woman (2.383). This "middle-aged not-silly man" (2.426) proves a mere hanger-on in the wake of his scheming wife; his death becomes a necessary but

unfortunate consequence of Guido's revenge. Violante, by contrast, receives appropriate recompense for her actions when she takes "all her stabbings in the face" (2.27); she set in motion the deceitful marriage between Pompilia & Guido and therefore deserved the severest punishment. Pompilia too receives appropriate retribution, this narrator alleges, as he misquotes the prescription against adultery in Leviticus 20:10 by pronouncing that only "'the faithless *wife* shall die'" (2.1478, my emphasis). That all three Comparini have been fatally disciplined, their punishment visible to the world,

Is the worse for Guido, but, be frank –
The better for you and me and all the world,
Husbands of wives, especially in Rome.
The things I put right, in the old place, -- ay,
The rod hangs on its nail behind the door . . . (2.1537-41)

By this account, marriage demands harsh regulations because women will inevitably stray, a position echoed, oddly enough, by Pompilia's own public defender. In Book IX, Johannes-Baptista Bottinius makes a case for Pompilia's waywardness at least as strong as that of her detractors: "Know one, you know all / Manners of maidenhood: mere maiden she. / And since all lambs are like in more than fleece, / Prepare to find that, lamb-like, she too frisks . . ." (9.221-24). By anticipating and playing to the general public's misogyny—salaciously describing flirtations Pompilia could have used to assure Caponsacchi's assistance in her escape—the lawyer's strategy to convict Guido at all costs simultaneously diminishes the court's confidence in Pompilia's own virtue.

Browning also reproduces (and undercuts) *ethnic* prejudices that fracture communal bonds. Figures who employ color-saturated tropes innocuously while describing moral character contrast sharply with those who play the most offensive kind of racial cards. Browning's framing narrator vividly depicts the historical account as something which "melts, / Trickles in

silent orange or wan grey / Across our memory, dies and leaves all dark . . .” (12.16-18), while the Pope regularly uses “white” to denote purity in Pompilia and the Christian faithful (10.682, 1453, 1830), retaining “black” for Guido and his fellow miscreants (10.511, 1236). His description of Guido as the “midmost blotch of black” serves an extended analogy which drops Guido amidst other criminals in a dark cave where each appears “coloured, all descried akin / By one and the same pitchy furnace” (10.869-78). The Pope likens Guido’s recent attempts to gain absolution through his tenuous connection with the church to his standing “honest in the red o’ the flame, / Beside this yellow that would pass for white . . .” (10.882-83). When *Tertium Quid* relies on tropes of color, on the other hand, the allegedly objective narrator betrays the most blatant racial prejudice. Describing the ease with which married women fall into disrepute, *Tertium Quid* mentions the recent adultery between a respected lady and her negro page as the most shocking example possible, a breach of socioeconomic and racial, as well as marital, boundaries (4.872-97). When *Tertium Quid* elsewhere employs darker hues *metaphorically*, a disturbing effluvium of bigotry lingers, floating just above his speech. He asks his wealthy auditors “[w]hich brownness is least black” when searching out their preference between Guido and the Comparini, and elsewhere describes the social-climbing Comparini as pursuing bachelor Guido because they presumably find in him “exceptional white / Amid the general brown o’ the species” (4.629-30, 4.333-34). The language of Margherita, Guido’s mistress and toady, also evinces a racist bent. The marriage of one of her former suitors to a woman he did not know had ““skin as black as ink”” constitutes, to her mind, a form of just punishment (7.1074).

The primary color tinting *Tertium Quid*’s narrative, however, turns out to be the pallid, ugly hue of class prejudice as various characters obsess over keeping the upper classes well removed from “the mob.” Whereas the high-born Caponsacchi references his social position

only as a last expedient, first when appealing his quarrel with Guido to Rome's ecclesiastical court (6.1570-80) and again when attempting to legitimize his story for those looking into Pompilia's murder (6.221-27), Guido and his sympathizers reify the social hierarchy whenever possible. Tertium Quid, the conspicuous sycophant who kowtows to an affluent audience throughout Book IV, describes Pompilia's repeated attempts at securing help from first the Archbishop, then the Governor, and finally a friar, as moving from "the high till come to lowest and last" (4.808), her pleas "Heard patiently and disposed of thoroughly / By the highest powers, possessors of most light . . ." (4.922-23). What most bothers Tertium Quid, as well as the wealthy cardinal and aristocrat with whom he is playing cards, is the spectre of class *mobility* that has possessed the Comparini, particularly as it relates to the movement of capital. Violante Comparini's actions deserve censure because she wishes to gain an alliance with Guido's respected house, but also because she has first passed off Pompilia as her own daughter to illegally gain an inheritance, robbing "the proper heirs . . . O' the due succession" (4.218-19). Everything Tertium Quid reports maps directly onto the sharply gradated, financial playing field he envisions. The narrator of Book II shares a similar preoccupation with class, one slightly more grounded in nobility and blood than old money. Half-Rome's instinctive sympathy with Guido's plight derives not only from a shared misogyny but a similar appreciation of the socio-economic hierarchy. His formulaic commendation of Guido as an "honest man . . . And man of birth to boot" (2.69-70) reverses the actual sequence of Half-Rome's logic, revealed elsewhere in his narrative: Guido comes of a noble name and *therefore* preserves a virtuous character. Since lineage equals privilege, Guido acted within his rights at every juncture, both when he exaggerated his estate's solvency to marry the wealthy Pompilia, and when he killed her after discovering she had birthed a male heir who could draw the Comparini's assets to himself.

Guido's contentious posture towards the world and his ongoing pursuit of wealth were not just permissible, argues Half-Rome; they were ordained. Guido belongs among those "as riches rub against, / Readily stick to,--one with a right to them / Born in the blood: 't was in his very brow / Always to knit itself against the world" (2.281-84). That Guido's lawyer and the man himself strongly agree with such reasoning almost goes without saying; the evidence of their similar preoccupations with class privilege proves far more unmistakable in their own accounts (Books V and VIII) and, as such, requires no elaboration here.

Guido's own most egregious mode of condescension lies, not in his devaluation of others' place in a patriarchal order, but in his erasure of their essential worth, an ongoing act of deletion most unambiguous in his pervasive exercise of words like "fool." Where Caponsacchi appropriates this particular designation to indicate a failing of judgment or moral character in himself or another (6.98-104, 179-85, 1781-84), Guido draws on the figurative appellation only to degrade and insult. A confident Guido will occasionally call himself a "preposterous fool" with a "'fool's head'" when self-deprecation seems the best way to gain sympathy from a hostile court (5.57, 223). No real self-abasement generates this name-calling, however, as demonstrated when Guido again calls himself a fool, this time for responding to Pompilia's supposed unfaithfulness with patience instead of the more decisive, punitive removal of her finger (5.979-81). By Book XI, Guido has begun to show the strain of his situation. Awaiting the execution mere hours away, he begins by offering a modicum of deference to the clerical friends visiting him in prison, using "fool" primarily in reference to his own actions: his decision to marry, his killing of Pompilia, and his recent, wild accusations that his auditors were complicit in his fate (11.167, 540-44, 11.846-54). Midway through this second monologue, however, his instinctive use of the word explodes into view as he begins flaying everyone within memory's reach. Like

Half-Rome and Archangelis, who label any and all of Guido's adversaries "fools" (2.481, 528, 840; 8.1208-12), and like Tertium Quid who leans heavily on the word to push Comparini and masses alike down to their rightful place in the dust, Guido employs the term to separate himself from his supposed intellectual inferiors. Among those he wildly stamps with the condescending tag are Pietro; Violante; his lawyers ("fools to the height, / Fools to the depth, Fools to the level between . . ."); his deceased father; any sovereign that would withhold funds rightfully his; and the hypothetical husband, one he considers a true "idiot," who fails to recognize a wife's proper, limited worth (11.1168-70, 1192-95, 1758-59, 1878, 2193-94, 2206-13). Guido also brazenly burlesques the words of those, including the Pope, who criticize his treatment of Pompilia, presumptuously placing "fool"—and the similarly condescending "simpleton"—on their tongues (11.067-68, 2039-41, 2114-17).

Guido's routine use of "fool" (he employs it over thirty times in Book XI alone) is obviously of a piece with his scornful deployment of similar labels including "idiot," "imbecile," and "stupid." Using the full range of intellectual insults at his disposal, he describes Pietro Comparini as a social-climbing moron, a

Kind of *idiot*!—such are rife in Rome,
But they wear velvet commonly; good *fools*,
At the end of life, to furnish forth young folk
Who grin and bear with *imbecility* . . . (11.1139-43, my emphasis).

Pietro, whom Guido likens to a Pantaloon willing to "flaunt his tom-fool tawdry just the same / As if Ash-Wednesday were mid-Carnival," does not hesitate to circulate his tale of Guido's less than hospitable treatment of himself and his wife, "Secure that men would in a breath believe / Compassionate and pardon them,--for why? / they plainly were too stupid to invent . . ." (11.1156-57, 1226-28). As the final end approaches, Guido forgets his previous apology and

once again bursts out at his auditors and “their stupidity and insolence / [which he] must defer to” (11.1500-1).

Guido’s instinctual use of this figurative language assumes a formula that links inherent *cognitive* differences across the populace with a corresponding, rigidly hierarchical and divisive *social* system—an ideological position many of his peers share. Though sarcasm qualifies his seemingly deferential description of power-brokers who have denied his requests for higher church position, “lords / Who judge the world, [and who] *bear brain I dare not brag . . .*,” his dependence on such stratifying classifications usually presents itself unequivocally (5.240-41, my emphasis). This dependence appears throughout Book XI, built upon an arrogant over-confidence in intellectual capital: “Manliness, mind,--these are things fit to save, / Fit to brush fly from . . .” (11.2252-53). Tertium Quid, whose purportedly objective account of events tends to privilege Guido, provides another detailed picture of intellectual conceit. In an ingratiating display before his rich auditors (whom he secretly considers to be “idiots” themselves, 4.1640), he loudly denigrates the abhorred plebeians as a mindless “mob,” “simpletons,” and a “rabble’s brabble of dolts and fools / Who make up reasonless unreasoning Rome” (4.15, 19, 9-10). Anyone attempting to lift the Comparini out of this “commonalty” by extending them grace during the legal process would wrongly “aggrandize, / Idealize, denaturalize the class” (4.64-66). Only Guido, an Aretine who “had touch / O’ the subtle air that breeds the subtle wit” (4.756-57), deserves any special consideration. Tertium Quid presents his own opinion of recent events as irrefutable, staking his intellectual status on the validity of his perspective: “if I fail / --Favoured with such an audience, understand!-- / To set things right, why, class me with the mob / As understander of the mind of man!” (4.58-61). This self-confident air and the opinions it floats gradually lose force amidst their own cross-currents and contradictions, and are further undercut

when we recollect the earlier, tongue-in-cheek introduction in which Browning sarcastically described Tertium Quid's sense of his own enlightened perspective, his "finer sense o' the city" and "reasoned statement of the case," what Browning mocked as "The critical mind, in short: no gossip-guess. / What the superior social section thinks . . ." (1.919-27).

Despite Archangelis's comically inept game plan for defending Guido, he effectively taps into the same system of intellectual condescension exhibited by his client. Not content with a merely pragmatic recognition of rank and privilege, the lawyer assumes an antagonistic posture of superiority, prefiguring how his own "mother-wit" will effectively counter the "[s]tupidly put" case under construction by Bottinius, his legal adversary (8.74, 174). Surely, the governor with "manly mind" called to assess their opposing arguments will prefer his own (8.1153-55).

Archangelis's rhetoric, relying heavily on the notion of honor as inestimable, asserts that any man whose reputation receives an injury must respond forcefully to avoid being classed with his intellectual inferiors: "Shall man,--confessed creation's master-stroke, / Nay, intellectual glory, nay, a god . . . Shall man prove the insensible, the block, / The blot o' the earth he crawls on to disgrace?" (8.534-38). Even "The Other Half-Rome," Guido's severest because most narrow-minded critic, participates in this essentialism; he constructs the four field hands who help carry out the Comparinis' murder as developmentally disabled "Brutes of his breeding, with one spark i' the clod / That served for a soul" (3.1576-77).

Such intellectual arrogance as Guido's fits the profile of one who, like Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau, sees everything categorically, his fate as well as his character. Guido depicts his situation as the direct result of cards dealt him by destiny, of loaded dice hurled in his direction (11.1702-3, 1755-56). Since a divine creator created him, he cannot be held responsible for actions which result from his prescribed "instinct of defence," and "natural caprice . . . Pure

nature!” (11.2303, 1439-40). Were he to appear before God, he claims he would instruct the Almighty to erase him as ““one huge and sheer mistake,--whose fault? / Not mine at least, who did not make myself!”” (11.939-40).

Browning’s version of Pope Innocent the Twelfth responds to the pride and intellectual hauteur of Guido and his cohort directly and thoroughly. He begins by probing Guido’s incredible claim to inviolability from prosecution, a claim rooted in class privilege and church affiliation. The Pope seizes Guido’s defense and turns it inside out, professing that the many privileges to which Guido has had access—“great birth, traditionary name, / Diligent culture, choice companionship” (10.431-32)—bring with them obligation, not freedom from responsibility. The Pope’s launches his own narrative, in fact, with deliberations on this very matter of personal accountability to the public. He explores his own imperfect judgment, “since man’s wit is fallible,” and considers whether the mere possibility of error should preclude his acting in Guido’s criminal trial (10.238). Like Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau, he wonders “in after-time, / If some acuter wit, fresh probing” would better assess the situation and provide a more just ruling than he, to whom God has ““meted out / So much of judging faculty, no more”” (10.265-67). Unlike the cowardly French prince of Browning’s later poem, however, the Pope ultimately decides he must assume the mantle of power he has been given and not only act, but take responsibility for that action, something Guido proves unwilling to do.

Surprisingly, perhaps, the heroic Pope recognizes the kinds of intellectual differences Browning destabilizes elsewhere. Guido sinned the more egregiously because his social privileges accompanied intellectual ones:

This is why Guido is found reprobate.
I see him furnished forth for his career,
On starting for the life-chance in our world,
With nearly all we count sufficient help

Body and mind in balance, a sound frame,
A solid intellect: the wit to seek,
Wisdom to choose . . . (10.399-405)

Note, however, that the Pope does not allow intellect itself to determine either human worth or an individual's fate; choice remains, and Guido has made a series of wrong ones, despite the best cognitive tools at his disposal. He has no one to blame but himself. His last error, "This hebetude that marred sagacity," has led to his capture and consequent conviction, a fatal "touch of fool in Guido the astute!" (10.815, 853). Guido's fate, though not inevitable, does follow the predictable path of a tragic hubris that holds at arm's length everyone not of immediate value. The count's over-confidence in his ability to outwit the idiots about him bespeaks a profoundly flawed faith in society's disunifying hierarchies of mind. As the Pope affirms, mind is "but a convex glass" that unites all the "scattered points" of human experience so as to reveal God to man (10.1311-12). The "little mind of man" (10.1321) serves as a tool, a conduit to greater things than itself. Alone, the human intellect cannot achieve lasting good:

Man's be the mind recognized at the height,--
Leave the inferior minds and look at man!
Is he the strong, intelligent and good
Up to his own conceivable height? Nowise.
Enough o' the low,--soar the conceivable height
Find cause to match the effect in evidence,
The work i' the world, not man's but God's; leave man!
Conjecture of the worker by the work:
Is there strength there?—enough: intelligence?
Ample: but goodness in a like degree?
Not to the human eye in the present state . . . (10.1355-65)

The Pope does not deny the God-given "intellect of man, / That sword, the energy his subtle spear, / The knowledge which defends him like a shield," but he does maintain that such attributes cannot measure up to the infinitely more valuable qualities of soul exhibited by such as Pompilia (10.1014-16).

As the Pope explains, Browning's heroine "was not given . . . to know much, / Speak much, to write a book, to move mankind . . .," yet she accomplished far better "in right returned / For wrong, most pardon for worst injury . . ." (10.1020-27). In illness as in health, she works to mend ruptures in the social fabric about her. During the final hours before she succumbs to her injuries, she recalls recent events in a manner surprisingly sympathetic to her villainous husband. She marks Guido as so "ill-used and cheated" that it seems reasonable, given the moral blindness he shares with everyone else, that he feel he "must needs retaliate" (7.639, 654-55). She pardons him, "as far as lies in me, / I give him for his good the life he takes . . . Let him make God amends . . ." (7.1709-12). And she chooses *not* to describe in damaging detail those moments of abuse when Guido treated her most severely, repeatedly backing away from what would hurt Guido's case as well as cause herself pain (7.1133-37, 1280-82, 1692-1700). She has practiced moral excellence, first in self-abnegation, then self-defence, and now in forgiveness, in each situation pursuing what she perceived as God's will, acting "[a]ccording to the light allotted" her (10.1050). Abuse by her husband, abandonment by her parents, and fear for her unborn child's life did not drive her to vengeance, as the Pope illustrates, but to surprising expressions of love:

What lacks, then, of perfection fit for God
 But just the instance which this tale supplies
 Of love without a limit? *So is strength,*
So is intelligence; let love be so,
 Unlimited in its self-sacrifice,
 Then is the tale true and God shows complete." (10.1367-72, my emphasis)

Browning's vision of the kind of character which most pleases God values love at least as much as, if not more than, mental acumen and physical strength. Once again intelligence finds its match in love, the common, stratifying over-emphasis on the former being balanced by the relational impulses of the latter.

Pompilia's own narrative reveals the degree to which Browning allows a Christian worldview to shape his heroine's spirituality and her perspective on recent events. Most strikingly, she does not use her final moments to call down vengeance on her husband, but in the beginning of Book VII intermittently indulges in rose-colored memories, as if she would prefer *not* reliving her grievances in her last moments (7.1-20, 180-205, 220-67). Pompilia receives no pleasure from rehearsing others' faults. When such a rehearsal appears inevitable she, like the Pope, casts every players' actions in strictly moral terms, effectively dodging her contemporaries' reliance on the criterion of native intelligence. Recalling Guido at his worst, she moves beyond admissions that he is a "wicked man" in a troubled society to Biblical language that likens him to Satan (7.231). Guido's successful thwarting of her attempts at escape earn him description as a "Serpent towering and triumphant," "a worm," the "neutralizer of all good and truth," and "the old adversary" (7.1589-96, 1618). Pompilia may be strong in patience, but she is not impervious to a prolonged assault: she acknowledges that the devious Guido appeared to her like the divine nemesis himself, and openly admits that she "detested" Margherita, the maid-in-waiting whom Guido used to bombard Pompilia with lies about Caponsacchi's affections (7.1347). Pompilia laces her descriptions of two failed sets of parents with pity, however, not rancor, as she continues relying on notions of Christian mercy. The beloved pair who raised her only to abandon her in crisis receives no violent, excessive condemnations of their character or intelligence. She dismisses any charges against Pietro and, while admitting that Violante "erred," attributes no malice to her secret plotting, describing the old woman's faults as temporary failures in judgment and perception (7.168-170, 270, 326-28). Pompilia grants similar leeway to her parents, the prostitute and the paying client who conceived her. She admits that her mother "did wrong," albeit "[a]t mercy of the hateful," and that her father was obviously

“wicked for his pleasure,” but she chooses to condemn neither in the wholesale terms employed by so many others (7.864-67, 293-95).

In another departure from her peers’ linguistic practice, Pompilia exercises figurative language grounded in disability to point out only *moral* failures. She marks herself, her parents, and Guido alike as “blind” to indicate their ignorance and ethical stumbling, calls “foolish” two apparent attempts by unknown men to flirt with her after she has married, and marks as ““witless”” those who do not recognize the heart motivating Caponsacchi’s actions (7.653-56, 668, 974-75, 1418-22). More importantly, she bypasses the notion of mind as a repository of differing amounts of knowledge and advocates an understanding of mind as, primarily, a tool for discerning moral truth, an instrument differently employed by every individual. To those convinced by the purported evidence and their own systems of reason that she and Caponsacchi did indeed become lovers, she responds

. . . wherefore should I blame you much?
So we are made, such difference in minds,
Such difference too in eyes that see the minds! (7.917-19).

With such words, Pompilia pulls to the foreground such character qualities as moral perspicuity, proposing distinctions of mind grounded more in concepts like motivation and intuition than education or some intelligence quotient. She also, however, begins to move slowly away from divisive classifications altogether, towards *description* and a nonjudgmental recognition of difference—a particularly radical move given her environment’s dominant patriarchal and hierarchical systems of classification.

At two different critical junctures in *Ferishtah’s Fancies*, Browning’s Arab mystic boldly tells his audience of disciples to “amend” their “nomenclature.” These penetrating words

initially appear during a discussion of fact and ““belief”” in “Shah Abas,” the first poem in which Ferishtah takes on his new role as dervish and teacher (ll.37-39). The injunction appears amidst reflections on the likelihood of certain improbable events and the common over-application of unqualified words like “impossible.” The instruction reappears in the collection’s last poem, “A Bean-Stripe: Also, Apple-Eating,” in effect allowing this reiterated piece of advice to book-end the collection of Ferishtah’s moral precepts. One explanation for why Browning allows this particular bit of didacticism to frame his collection lies in the etymology of “nomenclature,” a word which today generally denotes an established system for slotting found organisms and materials into predefined categories. The Latin *nomenclator* or “nomenclator,” from which the modern signifier derives, originally designated an individual who accompanied Roman political candidates about town so as to call out (*calare*) or identify the name (*nomen*) of each person they met and wished to solicit. Where current usage of “nomenclature” implies an established system of set types, “nomenclator” suggests an open process of recognizing (not assigning) identity, an ongoing course of discovery which recognizes that language, character, and circumstances alike demand close consideration of their special uniqueness.

Undoubtedly, this antique usage informs Ferishtah’s (i.e. Browning’s) deployment of the term. “Amend thy nomenclature,” that is, should not be read as a call to remove commonly abused words like “impossible” (or “idiot”) from the English language. Though the poet would have sympathized with John Locke’s complaint that *figurative* speech often constitutes an “abuse of language” that can “insinuate wrong ideas” and “mislead the judgment,” Browning enjoyed exploring the multiple significations of words of all colors and shapes too much to recommend ridding any particular term—or particular *use* of any term—from our discourse.⁴¹ No, Ferishtah’s repeated directive is less a call for a new taxonomy than it is an admonition to

question the very perceptual and ideological rubrics that organize our interpersonal communication. These would include that impulse to categorize and stratify which so clearly, tragically divides communities and ruptures relationships in Browning's poems. By illuminating the many destructive purposes to which humanity has put this impulse—and the disunifying language practice that accompanies them—Browning effectively calls his division-prone race to assume fuller responsibility for its ideas and its language. In light of the poet's ongoing interrogation of those pervasive social and linguistic systems that rely on native characteristics to delimit the "other," Ferishtah's words become more than another declaration to "look beyond the signifier to the thing signified" ("With Bernard de Mandeville," l. 192). They become an invitation to abandon old racial, sexual, socioeconomic, and intellectist prejudices in favor of a relational heuristic which closely considers all of another's characteristics before assigning labels, and which never ceases searching for what Sordello called "a sort of consciousness / Under the imbecility" (3.62-63).

Notes

¹ Galton's gender and racial bias is no less disturbing for being peripheral to his main project. He includes only British males in his study (referring to women infrequently, usually as "relatives" or "mistresses" of the subjects under review) and reiterates more obviously racist distinctions between the "highest Caucasian" and the "lowest savage" en route to a new, *intellectual* hierarchy (47, 80, 66).

² Galton, 35.

³ Georges Canguilhem, *On the Normal and the Pathological* (London: D. Reidel, 1966) 11, 70-77.

⁴ *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000) 135.

⁵ David Wright, *Mental Disability in Victorian England: The Earlswood Asylum 1847-1901* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001) 15-16. Vieda Skultans, *Madness and Morals: Ideas on Insanity in the Nineteenth Century*. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975) 241-42. Wright, 182. Martin Halliwell, *Images of Idiocy: The Idiot Figure in Modern Fiction and Film* (Cornwall: Ashgate, 2004) 11.

⁶ Wright, 37-39, 188-91.

⁷ To Alfred Domett (15 May 1843), *The Browning's Correspondence* (hereafter abbreviated as *BC*) 7: 125; to Isabella Blagden (27 March 1860), *Dearest Isa* 57-60; to Isabella Blagden (19 January 1868), *Dearest Isa* 287-91.

⁸ To Elizabeth Barrett Browning (6 January 1846), *BC* 11:293; to Isabella Blagden (29 December 1871) *Dearest Isa* 370-71; to Isabella Blagden (30 December 1870), *Dearest Isa* 352-54.

⁹ The first two examples can be found in "To Isabella Blagden" (29 March 1867), *Dearest Isa* 260-61; the third in "To Isabella Blagden" (11 September 1858), *Dearest Isa* 20-21.

¹⁰ Galton, 65. To Rev Dr Trusler (23 August 1799), *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*. ed. David V. Erdman (New York: Anchor Books, 1982) 702-703.

¹¹ Following the commercial failure (and tepid critical reception) of *Men and Women* (1855), Browning appears to have "accepted defeat," turning from poetry to such pastimes as drawing. See William Irvine and Park Honan, *The Book, The Ring, and the Poet: A New Biography of Robert Browning* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1974) 344, 356, 370.

¹² See chapter one, "Johnson, Locke, and Congregationalism," in Hair's book for a discussion of how Johnson's *Dictionary* and book three of Locke's *An Essay Concerning Human*

Understanding influenced Browning's posture towards language. Note, also, that Hair's description of Browning's attitude toward linguistic equivocation is, ultimately, significantly more bright-eyed than mine. I put to the side those palpable benefits Browning derived from linguistic flux (as evidenced in his characters' speech, etc.) to foreground the less obvious problems he admitted to having with language. Donald S. Hair, *Robert Browning's Language* (Ontario: University of Toronto Press, 1999).

¹³ Warwick E. Slinn, *Victorian Poetry as Cultural Critique: The Politics of Performative Language* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2003) 54.

¹⁴ Flavia Alaya, "The Ring, The Rescue, and the Risorgimento: Reunifying the Brownings' Italy," *Browning Institute Studies* 6 (1978): 1-41. See also EBB's letters to Arabella: "To Arabella and Henrietta Moulton-Barrett" (8 February 1847), *BC* 14: 121-28; "To Arabella Moulton-Barrett" (9 March 1847) *BC* 14: 139-48. In the latter, EBB writes "before the year closes we hope to bring out a collection of poems on Italy, with our separate signatures."

¹⁵ Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *The Complete Poetical Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, ed. Harriet Waters Preston (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1900) 431.

¹⁶ To Elizabeth Barrett Browning (13 January 1845), *BC* 10:22.

¹⁷ Harrison, 75 (and see the entirety of his chapter entitled "Elizabeth Barrett in 1838: 'Weakness like Omnipotence', pp.71-101). Barrett Browning's "Cry of the Children" impacted her society around 1843, helping shape a report on the employment of children in mines and factories drawn up by Assistant Commissioner Mr. Horne.

¹⁸ "Introduction," *Poems by Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, eds. Marjorie Stone and Beverly Taylor. Broadview Press, forthcoming 2006.

¹⁹ Critics have generally considered Browning's best poetry to be apolitical. Harold Bloom, for instance, privileges the complex symbolism of poems like "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came," so as to more easily claim for Browning what Bloom calls the "nihilistic Sublime," a kind of poetic vision that does not call for any particular kind of action—spiritual, social or otherwise—because it never loses sight of its own inherent artifice, its "status as figuration" (Bloom 2). Harold Bloom, "Introduction: Reading Browning," *Robert Browning: A Collection of Critical Essays*, eds. Harold Bloom and Adrienne Munich (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1979): 1-12.

²⁰ Rowena Fowler, "Browning and Slavery," *Victorian Poetry* 37.1 (1999): 59.

²¹ Galton, 21, 27 and 47.

²² Galton, 78.

²³ Note Galton's condescension when describing those lacking mathematical or scientific expertise: "Every tutor knows how difficult it is to drive abstract conceptions, even of the simplest kind, into the brains of most people—how feeble and hesitating is their mental grasp—how easily their brains are mazed—how incapable they are of precision and soundness of knowledge. It often occurs to persons familiar with some scientific subject to hear men and women of mediocre gifts relate to one another what they have picked up about it from some lecture—say at the Royal Institution, where they have sat for an hour listening with delighted attention to an admirably lucid account, illustrated by experiments of the most perfect and beautiful character, in all of which they expressed themselves intensely gratified and highly instructed. It is positively painful to hear what they say. Their recollections seem to be a mere chaos of mist and misapprehension, to which some sort of shape and organization has been given by the action of their own pure fancy, altogether alien to what the lecturer intended to convey. The average mental grasp even of what is called a well-educated audience, will be found to be ludicrously small when rigorously tested" (62).

²⁴ Robert Browning, *Learned Lady: Letters from Robert Browning to Mrs. Thomas FitzGerald 1876-1889*, ed. Edward C. McAleer (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1966) 34-35.

²⁵ I use "subjective" here in the same sense Browning employed it in his essay on Percy Bysshe Shelley. Robert Browning, "Essay on Shelley," (Feb., 1852), *The Poetical Works of Robert Browning*. Vol. IV, *Bells and Pomegranates VII-VIII*. Eds. Ian Jack, Rowena Fowler, and Margaret Smith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999) Appendix A, 424-42.

²⁶ Pettigrew and Collins argue that a flimsy, permeable veil is all that separates the ideas of Browning and Ferishtah. John Pettigrew and Thomas J. Collins. Notes. *The Poems*. Vol. I. Eds. John Pettigrew and Thomas J. Collins (New Haven: Yale UP, 1981) 1096.

²⁷ Edgar Allan Poe, "The Poetic Principle," *The Complete Poems and Stories of Edgar Allan Poe*, eds. Arthur Hobson Quinn and Edward H. O'Neill. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1946) 1021-40.

²⁸ The Brownings' support of the Italian movement for independence is everywhere in their correspondence. Robert Browning expressed his idiosyncratic belief in the justice of dueling, a position with which EBB vehemently took issue, on 6 April 1846, and in the letters that followed in the subsequent week (see their letters between 8 April and 10 April). He was willing, however, to temporarily bury his opinion for her peace of mind. See Julia Markus, *Dared and Done: The Marriage of Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning* (Athens: Ohio UP, 1995) 42, 45.

²⁹ Pettigrew and Collins note that contemporary reviewers "found themselves at odds over the attitude that the poem conveyed towards the Emperor." John Pettigrew and Thomas J. Collins. Notes. *The Poems*. Vol. I. Eds. John Pettigrew and Thomas J. Collins (New Haven: Yale UP, 1981) 1177.

³⁰ Langbaum, 86, 106.

³¹ Mrs. Orr's readings of these works tends towards the latter, privileged conclusion regarding mental illness; she had a significantly different rationale for why the titles might have been changed. Remarking upon the fact that Browning removed the original title, "Madhouse Cells," which headed this poem, and "Johannes Agricola in Meditation," Mrs. Orr says: "Such a crime might be committed in a momentary aberration, or even intense excitement of feeling. It is characterized here by a matter-of-fact simplicity, which is its sign of madness. The distinction, however, is subtle; and we can easily guess why this and its companion poem did not retain their title. A madness which is fit for dramatic treatment is not sufficiently removed from sanity." Mrs. Sutherland Orr. Quoted in notes. *Dramatic Romances*, eds. Charlotte Porter and Helen A. Clarke (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell and Company, 1898) 398.

³² For the simplest articulations of their theory, see chapter four in their seminal *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

³³ Avital Ronell, *Stupidity* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002) 27.

³⁴ "Balaustion's Adventure" (1871): of the funeral procession: "Paced after that symmetric step of Death / **Mute-marching**" (ll. 1605-1606). "Prince Hohnestiel-Schwangau, Saviour of Society" (1871): "**mute as mouse**" (l. 884). "Fifine at the Fair" (1872): "and **mutely make** / Defiance" (ll. 595-96). AND "What common shape was that wherein they **mutely merged** / Likes and dislikes of form, so plain before?" (ll. 2040-41). "Red Cotton Night-Cap Country, or Turf and Towers" (1873): "Thus **mutely might** our friend soliloquize / Over the tradesman's bills, his Clara's gift" (ll. 1808-9). "Aristophanes Apology" (1875): Aristophanes (after B's recital of the play): "'Accordingly, / I shall not decorate her [the Muse's] vestibule - / **Mute marble, blind** the eyes and quenched the **brain** . . .'" (ll. 5268-70)

³⁵ Some African-Americans and members of the gay community have encouraged similar linguistic trends, appropriating contemptuous words like "nigger" and "fag" for their own use, endeavoring to turn insults into claimed markers of identity.

³⁶ William Irvine and Park Honan note that "When Robert fell into an arrogant habit of calling people 'fools,' [his mother] pointed out as a good Christian that "'whoso calleth his brother 'fool' is in danger &c. for he hath committed murder in his heart already.'" 'In short,' her son concluded to Elizabeth Barrett, 'I stood there a convicted *murderer* . . . to which I was forced penitently to agree.' Robert was attracted to his mother by fear as well as by love" (5).

³⁷ "Fool." *Oxford English Dictionary*. Definitions 1a, 2a, and 4. Second Edition, 1989.

³⁸ See Donald S. Hair's *Robert Browning's Language* for a discussion of Browning's affinity for the word "fool" and his developing understanding of the term, from childhood onwards (16-19).

³⁹ I incline slightly towards the belief that Browning reveals some emotional, even passionate intimacy between the two. Those familiar with his poetry cannot but recognize in

Caponsacchi's "when at the last we did rush each on each" (6.1812), an echo of the memorable phrase "two hearts beating each to each" from the romantic "Meeting at Night" (1845).

⁴⁰ Eventually, of course, she does reach the limit of human righteousness and suddenly becomes "[s]ublime in new impatience with the foe!" (10.1048-60). Browning did not condone any kind of emotional or physical abuse within marriage.

⁴¹ John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690; New York: Prometheus, 1995) 411.

Chapter Five

Alcoholics, Madwomen, Cretins, and Idiots:

Configuring Care of Disordered Minds in the Novels of the Brontë Sisters

In May of 1842, *Fraser's Magazine* published an unnamed writer's account of his recent visit to a London asylum, the opening paragraphs of which must have sounded horribly familiar to the sisters of Patrick Branwell Brontë.¹ The anonymous author launches his observations about the institution with a brief, contemptuous account of a near relation's son under treatment there, a patient whose illness mirrored rather closely the sickness exhibited by Branwell upon his return to Haworth in March of 1842.² The contributor to *Fraser's* adopts a markedly unsympathetic tone as he describes his relative's institutionalized progeny, noting that he

has brought himself an access of that dreadful malady called *delirium tremens*, through over-indulgence in the use of ardent spirits and a long course of dissipation . . . nothing very interesting can be expected in reference to a being who has debased himself by excessive drinking, far below the level of the brute creation. . . .³

By the writer's account, the "unhappy father" was "*obliged* to place [his son] under restraint" for a time, the boy's behavior and resulting mental infirmity leaving him with no viable, socially acceptable alternative (my emphasis).⁴ This forced relocation of the troublesome family member sharply separates these two, otherwise very similar, situations. While the cause and course of Branwell's condition matched that of his institutionalized contemporary virtually point-for-point, the Reverend Patrick Brontë refused to relegate the tending of his increasingly troublesome son to professionals. This decision, moving counter to growing trends in England and Europe,

provided Charlotte, Anne, and Emily Brontë with considerable understanding of the many challenges involved in caring for a disordered mind within the confines of a private space.

By the time the sisters began to create their most famous novels, they had long years of practical detail and emotional fatigue on which to draw. Their experiences with the drug-addled brain of their brother shape their portrayals of not only alcohol and drug-induced psychosis, but mental illness and mental disability—discrete infirmities often conflated by the nineteenth-century prejudices of an able-minded populace. Anne and Charlotte's renderings of the alcoholic Arthur Huntingdon, the mentally ill Bertha Mason, and the mentally disabled Marie Broc reflect the sisters' expert knowledge of the difficulties involved in personal, prolonged supervision of a disordered mind. These portrayals also draw attention to and unapologetically praise those other characters—figures which include Helen Huntingdon, Lucy Snowe, and even the infamous Edward Fairfax Rochester—who somehow manage to provide personal, prolonged care for the disordered minds in their charges. The author of *Wuthering Heights* (1847) adds an interesting counterpoint to her sisters' work, particularly to Charlotte's *Villette* (1853). Where the eldest sister creates an intense but very brief vignette of the circumstances surrounding Lucy Snowe's tending of one with congenital idiocy, a portrait sympathetic to the complex emotional experience of the dutiful individual providing the care, Emily's more oblique approach focuses on the potential victims of a specter-like idiocy that can enter into one through trauma, illness, or another's machinations, an approach that implicates *the family itself* in not only the course, but the *creation*, of idiocy.

The Rise and Fall of Progressive Care in the Nineteenth Century

The type of long-term, intimate encounter with cognitive disorder experienced by the Brontë sisters was slowly, inexorably becoming less common as the nineteenth-century moved forward. The removal of society's bothersome denizens so decried by Michel Foucault had by the Victorian period become a socially acceptable, even professionally encouraged option. Prior to this, depositing inconvenient family members in European asylums had been a simple process for only a well-placed minority—wealthy Frenchmen concerned more with their family's "honor" than its structural integrity;⁵ a few secretive London magistrates and Bethlem governors preoccupied with personal economy;⁶ and the members of the upper classes eager to pursue some love affair, perhaps with the assistance of a reallocated family estate.⁷

Within the course of Charlotte Brontë's life (1816-1855), the institutional and medical gains made on behalf of lunatics and idiots would wage war against an unfortunate, profound ideological shift that was filling the newly available institutions a little too quickly. On the one hand, conditions did improve. During the first half of the nineteenth-century, the number of institutional establishments tripled in number, improving the physical and psychological health of patients, at least for a time. An Act to Regulate the Care and Treatment of Insane Persons in 1828 required doctors to visit their patients weekly to insure quality of care, the County Asylums Act of 1845 forced each borough and county to erect new public asylums in order to meet the needs of its pauper lunatics, and the first two English institutions for idiots and imbeciles opened in the late 1840s. The small but promising Bath Institution for Idiot Children and those of Weak Intellect opened in 1846, and another idiot institution opened in London two years later. By the year of Charlotte's death in 1855, this second and larger idiot asylum at Park House, Highgate,

had already subdivided twice; the latter of the three resulting institutions grew into the enormous Earlswood Asylum, the first of four large regional idiot asylums soon dotting the country.⁸

Unfortunately, an exponential expansion in institutional space and a corresponding increase in the number of practitioners available to work in the new asylums did not translate into long-term improvements for every mentally ill or mentally disabled patient. The same period that witnessed expanding treatment options also witnessed a significant constriction in the newly industrialized society's willingness to devote long, emotionally exhausting hours to caring for those with illnesses and disabilities: English culture began to view their increasingly visible and numerous institutions less like a last resort and more like a practical panacea. The growing number of asylums housing mentally ill and mentally disabled (and sometimes drug-addicted) individuals presented a new, less personally demanding alternative to those who had once taken care of their ill-behaved and cognitively challenged relatives as a matter of course.⁹ Where public policy in the medieval period had at least nominally encouraged family and friends to care for the mentally challenged,¹⁰ by the mid-nineteenth century public opinion and medical precedent were often recommending that such individuals be removed from their familiars. Idiots and imbeciles—who for centuries had been ejected from Hospitals such as Bethlem and into the comparatively tolerant care of the family, community, and a wide assortment of anonymous charities¹¹—now began to form a critical mass in the ubiquitous workhouses which grudgingly absorbed their numbers. The new idiot asylums just could not expand quickly enough to meet public demand. During the last half of the nineteenth-century, these charitable institutions began to accept more clients than they were prepared to treat, leading to overcrowding and, consequently, less consistent and individualized care.

The solution had aggravated the problem. More houses of confinement made treatment more practical for just long enough to establish the public's reliance on the resource, making it that much more difficult for families to resume care of their own once the new institutions were filled.

Domestic Spaces: The Branwell Factor

The Brontë sisters' beloved brother Branwell, with his wonderfully fecund storytelling mind and unrelenting poetic aspirations, was obviously no idiot. He was no lunatic either, and yet his alcohol and opium-induced fits and stupors would mimic characteristics of both mental disability and mental illness, troubling and frightening his family in the same ways that these disabilities complicated other Victorian households. Branwell's troubles appear to have begun as early as 1841; in May of the following year he refers to his time as Clerk in Charge at Luddenden Foot station as one of "groveling carelessness . . . malignant yet cold debauchery, the determination to find how far mind could carry body without both being chucked into hell," the escape from which was a "recovery from *almost insanity* (his emphasis).¹² Francis Grundy, who worked beside Branwell during this period, explained Branwell's eventual dismissal as the result of bad behavior—a tendency to leave all his work to a thieving porter and take himself off to "[carouse] with congenial drinkers" for days on end.¹³ Unfortunately, instead of curbing his self-destructive habits, Branwell's next job indirectly exacerbated his condition. Branwell spent his holiday away from the new tutoring job drinking himself into illness—Charlotte notes that he was "toujours malade" during his vacation¹⁴—and, upon being fired from the position two years later for inappropriate behavior (presumably a liaison with the wife of his employer, Mr. Robinson), appears to have resigned himself to depression. In a letter written in October of

1846, Branwell bemoans his separation from Mrs. Robinson and his subsequent malaise: “all is yet with me clouds and darkness . . . Constant and unavoidable depression of mind and body sadly shackle me in even trying to go on with any mental effort.”¹⁵ However enervated his depression and inaction made him, Branwell apparently did muster the stamina to get off the couch and head into town for a fix whenever his mind started to clear. From this point until his death three years later, Branwell spent whatever money he could get on stimulants, borrowing money on his family’s credit when his own funds ran dry, and forcing his father and sisters to deal with his incessant “drinking bouts, unstable temper, and deteriorating health.”¹⁶ All this occurred during the same period when his sisters were shaping their most famous novels and, notably, their most infamous anti-heroes and villains.¹⁷ Before death could finally release him from the torment that had become his life, Branwell had undermined his health to the point where he often fell down in fits,¹⁸ had required extrication from a burning bed he himself set alight,¹⁹ and had taught his closest sister to loathe as much as she had always loved him.

Charlotte’s letters to her good friend Ellen Nussey track this slow and painful change from adoration to disgust, providing a meaningful glimpse into the ongoing emotional battle experienced by the sisters as they watched Branwell rage against the life he shared with those around him. In the early 1840s, Charlotte’s affection for her brother remains relatively strong. She reports her anticipation of seeing him again during the holidays in 1841,²⁰ and takes great pleasure in recalling the imaginative adventures they shared during their childhood romps through the fantasyland of Angria.²¹ By early in 1845, however, Charlotte has begun qualifying her appreciation of his presence, noting that he has been “quieter and *less irritable on the whole* this time than he was in Summer.”²² Soon after his return in disgrace from the Robinson family at Thorp Green, Charlotte describes his behavior and its effect on the family in distressing detail:

We have had sad work with Branwell since—he thought of nothing but stunning <his>, or drowning his distress of mind—no one in the house could have rest—and at last we have been obliged to send him from home for a week with some one to look after him—he has written to me this morning and expresses some sense of contrition for his frantic folly—he promises amendment on his return—but so long as he remains at home I scarce dare hope for peace in the house—We must all I fear prepare for a season of distress and disquietude—When I left you I was strongly impressed with the feeling that I was going back to sorrow.²³

Apparently, though the Brontës remained unwilling to institutionalize their afflicted family member, Branwell's illness had proven such a burden that they resorted to temporarily removing him from their house at Haworth, if only for a few days. By November of 1845, Charlotte has begun to lament her inability to write *anything* redemptive about her brother.²⁴ In a letter written early the next year, she explains why: Branwell emerges from his habitual stupors only to cozen drinking money from his doting father, having become a ““hopeless being”” one cannot bear to be around, one whose future looks dark indeed.²⁵ The merciful arrival of his death two years later ends Branwell's struggle but not Charlotte's own, as evidenced in her subsequent recollection of those old, fond “aspirations and ambitions for him” that dissolved into present, intense “bitterness of pity for his life and death,” bitterness she can only hope “time will allay.”²⁶

And yet, though her faith in her brother faded, Charlotte's commitment to sharing responsibility for his care did not. Despite the grief Branwell brought his family—distress Charlotte felt uncomfortable revealing to anyone other than Ellen²⁷—Charlotte was quite adamant about a family's responsibility to itself. When she heard that Ellen Nussey's brother John had refused to care for the intemperate Joseph Nussey, a dear sibling whose behavior and condition echoed Branwell's in a number of ways, Charlotte lashed out with righteous indignation. She considered the wealthy doctor “deeply to blame” for not helping his family tend to Joseph, remarking that though John obviously had many duties on him already, the call to

care for his brother was “certainly one of the most sacred he [could] have.”²⁸ Charlotte and her sisters would not shirk such duty, even during those moments when it might seem most unjust that “that those who [had] not sinned should suffer so largely” as a consequence of another’s avoidable, self-inflicted sufferings.²⁹

Direct and Indirect Translations: Branwell as Drug Addict and Madwoman

Anne Brontë, by most accounts the quietest and most patient of the siblings, provides Victorian readers with arguably the sisters’ most direct and critical transliteration of Branwell’s difficult behavior. In *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848), the Brontë family’s shared affection for Branwell is transformed into the romantic attraction of the beautiful Helen for the dashing Arthur Huntingdon, a libertine who betrays his wife’s affections within a year of their marriage. With the assistance of fellow carousers and repeated “business” trips to London—the requisite den of iniquity in Anne’s novel—Arthur begins a downward course his wife’s complaints fail to slow. Arthur succeeds in killing himself with drink and other excesses in about the same time it takes Branwell to do the same, but not before successfully alienating his wife by teaching their little son to drink and swear, and by conducting extramarital affairs within the confines of their own house. Desperate to escape the moral infection that spreads each time her love for Arthur normalizes behavior that once would have “shocked and disgusted” her—and still more fearful that her son will grow into a replica of his father—Helen takes flight and creates a new life for herself and little Arthur in another town (263).

If Anne had ended the story at this point, with her heroine escaping moral degradation and endless sorrow through relocation, then the book’s moral lesson would be as simple as that which she articulates in the preface to the second edition:

I know that such characters [as Arthur and Helen] do exist, and if I have warned one rash youth from following in their steps, or prevented one thoughtless girl from falling into the very natural error of my heroine, the book has not been written in vain. (xxxviii)

To be sure, Anne did intend to shock her audience into self-analysis. She hoped those brutally honest scenes she had “carefully copied from the life, with a most scrupulous avoidance of all exaggeration” would jolt at least a few male and female readers into reexamining the nature of their sexual appetite, however many others might be dismayed and repulsed by such verisimilitude (xxxviii). The didactic novel also preaches, however, a balancing of moral outrage with *compassion*, and a strong desire for self-preservation tempered by an equally powerful impulse towards *self-sacrifice*. When Helen hears that her husband’s debaucheries have seriously compromised his health, she returns to the man for whom she has such mixed feelings and, instead of bringing in doctors and nurses to do the thankless work for her, tends him herself during the long weeks that precede his death. With her son’s safety eliminated from the equation, she can respond to this other call of duty; that she does so knowing full well the difficulties she will face surprises everyone, most of all her husband. She patiently attends one who prevents her from sleeping for days at a time, who repeatedly grabs and curses her, and who depresses her spirit with his religious disbelief. Like Anne, Emily, and Charlotte, Helen cares for one bound to her by old love and familial ties and now stretched to the breaking point, doing so not for personal gain (she interrupts a budding romance with Gilbert Markham to look after Arthur), but in response to that “sacred” call recognized by the sisters Brontë.³⁰

The character of Bertha Mason, the absent-present madwoman of Charlotte’s *Jane Eyre* (1847), is yet another fictionalization of the Brontë family secret given form and movement. Though female, and sporting an *inherited* disability, Bertha’s behavior unmistakably echoes Branwell’s own.³¹ Her behavior exacerbates her dysfunction in the same way that Branwell’s

behavior creates his, and her condition presents Rochester with the same quandary which faced Helen and the Brontë sisters: what is one to do with the disordered mind in one's midst?

Many modern critics would have us believe the man who shuts Bertha up in a secluded attic is the real monster of the tale. Rochester has been likened to a British *imperialist* who attempts to enforce his will onto a cultural other,³² and has been written off as a pleasure-seeking profligate whose criminal habit of "exploiting others" leads him to marry Miss Mason "for status, for sex, for money, for everything but love and equality."³³ As revisionary tellings like Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) would have it, Bertha ("Antoinette" in Rhys's novel) is the real victim of circumstance, not Rochester. She is the sad partner of one who actively, malevolently *creates* her disability through his neglect and abuse.

Though Rochester's failures are legion and irrefutable, the novel itself does not provide all the rope with which he has been repeatedly hung. True, he places the mentally ill Bertha in a secluded room and leaves her to the care of the alcoholic Grace Poole, taking himself off to other climes and the warm embraces of other women. When a decade's worth of such liaisons fail to refresh him, Rochester does return to England, quickly fall in love with plain Jane, and try to marry her under false pretenses. Whether his actions mark him as a total louse, however, and whether we can without compunction ignore his melodramatic explanations in his defense, are other matters. Is Rochester's treatment of Bertha quite so morally heinous as first appears in the scalding light of Jane's shock at his deception? Recollection of the novel's medico-historical context and reexamination of the story's details suggest the author has gone to great lengths to answer this query with a resounding "No."

The first bit of exonerating evidence lies in Bertha's madness itself, the very existence of which some have attributed to Rochester's treatment of his wife. The reader observes Bertha's

aspect and actions primarily through Jane's eyes, and it is Jane's perspective, combined with the reader's broadening knowledge of this extremely dangerous woman, that gives the lie to such a single-minded interpretation. Jane first encounters Bertha late one evening when the mentally ill woman glides into Jane's bedroom and violently tears the wedding veil of the bride-to-be. Jane likens the strangely aggressive phantom to a "foul German specter—the Vampyre," an analogy the reader recognizes as curiously apropos given Bertha's earlier, vicious attack on the brother who pays her a visit, an attack during which Bertha not only stabs but bites Dick Mason and begins to suck his blood (358, 266-67). After Mr. Mason and his solicitor have disrupted Jane and Rochester's wedding and awakened the young governess to Bertha's real identity, Jane meets her competition in more "formal" fashion. Led past Grace Poole, the gatekeeper whom Jane has until this moment thought responsible for the blood, fire, and howling that have enlivened Thornfield in recent weeks, the distressed bride witnesses firsthand the violent behavior of the woman legally bound to Rochester. The aggressive and barely lucid (394) Bertha who attacks Rochester during this visit does not resemble the kind of distressed, victimized wife locked away in novels like *Castle Rackrent* (1800), and she surely does not fit the Victorian ideal of a kind marital companion.³⁴ Despite Rochester's failings in honesty (and, admittedly, compassion) the reader begins to understand why he might have sought intimacy elsewhere.

The question remains, however, as to whether Rochester has aggravated or, worse, *created* Bertha's cognitive disorder. Charlotte offers an elaborate response to this query in the form of the long story which the desperate Rochester narrates in hopes that a better-informed Jane will remain by his side. Instead of rejecting outright Rochester's self-defense, and dismissing his version of events as another lie spun by a confirmed and practiced deceiver, it

makes sense for the reader both to remember that Jane believes Rochester speaks the truth during this long conversation (398), and to place his strange description of Bertha's transformation alongside contemporary socio-medical notions concerning mental illness. His description of Bertha's swift descent into insanity may seem oddly variegated—like the fabrication of a man desperate to defend his reputation at any cost—until one remembers how well his explanation gels with the period's widespread belief that alcohol abuse and sexual promiscuity could create or accelerate the course of mental illness. Born of a mother now mad and sister to an idiot and a simpleton, Bertha inherits a family disease, the progress of which she accelerates by what Victorian readers would have recognized as highly immoral behavior (389-90). Rochester explains that he had little chance to get to know Bertha during their whirlwind romance in the West Indies. Each time he ran into Miss Mason at a social event, her dizzying beauty and charm swept aside the hot-blooded young man's thoughts about character and conscience. Only after entering into a marriage set in motion by his father and elder brother does Rochester discover Bertha's pathological inclinations. As Rochester describes it, her ““intemperate and unchaste”” habits quickly and ““prematurely [develop] the germs of insanity”” (391)—a formula for madness consistent enough with eighteenth-century and early Victorian medical models of mental illness.³⁵ Following the precedent set by doctors in the West Indies who had confined her towards the close of their first four years as a married couple, Rochester confined Bertha in his house upon returning to England and hired Grace Poole from the nearby Grimsby Retreat, an asylum presumably grounded in the same progressive, moral management principles as William Tuke's York Retreat (395).³⁶ Some readers, however, refuse to move past the fact that Rochester kept his own wife locked up *at all*. Whatever encouraging medical precedents and parental anxieties (394) may have encouraged his covert confinement of Bertha, the act of incarceration

itself seems to admit no excuse; surely this is the act of a man concerned more about his own freedom and reputation than his wife's welfare.

Charlotte allows the reader to believe Rochester this depraved only as long as Jane herself does, lessening the burden of Rochester's guilt by revealing certain motivational factors and extenuating circumstances that inform his actions, and by suggesting alternative courses of action which he *avoids* taking. First, Charlotte mitigates blame by obliquely suggesting that the course of action adopted by Rochester had supernatural origins. The reader's skepticism of Rochester's claim that "true Wisdom" freed him to marry again, that he not only "could" but "ought" to do so, must yield at least partially by the novel's end (393, 396). Rochester's fantastic tale of a breeze blowing in from Europe and interrupting his suicide attempt, instructing him to confine his wife and seek out new companionship on the continent (393-94), gains credence towards the conclusion when yet another windy *deus ex machina* saves him yet again. In this second crucial moment, as Jane considers giving herself over to the missionary lifestyle of her zealous cousin St. John, yet another reliable, magico-divine current of air intervenes, this time conveying Rochester's distant cry of "Jane" to the distraught heroine's ear and compelling her to abandon St. John and seek out her old love (536).

A second and more self-evident piece of evidence that should temper any judgment of Rochester lies in the hot-tempered man's ongoing struggle to balance the rage he feels towards Bertha with his sense of responsibility. Considerable evidence supports the declaration he makes to Bertha's anxious brother, "I do my best; and have done and will do it" (270). The struggle to curb his dislike repeatedly plays across Rochester's features, revealing an ongoing contest between passionate dislike and the claims of duty, between hatred and concern. Early in their relationship, the master of Thornfield describes to Jane that curious abhorrence of the mansion

which pollutes his appreciation of its antiquity and thorn-trees, an antipathy that visibly wrestles with another and more powerful impulse:

Lifting his eye to its battlements, he cast over them a glare such as I never saw before or since. Pain, shame, ire—impatience, disgust, detestation—seemed momentarily to hold a quivering conflict in the large pupil dilating under his ebon eyebrow. Wild was the wrestle which should be paramount; but another feeling rose and triumphed: something hard and cynical; self-willed and resolute: it settled his passion and petrified his countenance . . . (175)

Only with the clarity born of hindsight does the reader realize Bertha's presence has engendered this hatred, and that it is Rochester's ironclad determination that repeatedly, violently corrals his resentment. The same self-control reappears when Mr. Mason describes the bloody result of his sister's attack on his own person. Rochester shudders, "a singularly marked expression of disgust, horror, hatred warp[s] his countenance almost to distortion; but he only [says]:-- 'Come, be silent, Richard, and never mind her gibberish: don't repeat it'" (267). When Bertha attacks Rochester himself, and nearly succeeds in squeezing the life out of him, he again restrains himself. Admittedly, his sarcastic description of this attack as "'the sole conjugal embrace [he is] ever to know'" dismisses the diseased Bertha's own experience and perspective in demeaning fashion, but his overwhelming bitterness and acidic words should not occlude another important line that Jane slips into her description: "He could have settled her with a well-planted blow; but he would not strike: he would only wrestle" (371). In an era when corporal punishment of one's spouse was still respected as an appropriate corrective measure,³⁷ surely no one present would have blamed Rochester for punching his powerful and "athletic" attacker in self-defense, and yet still he withholds his hand (371). He has nothing to gain from such self-restraint, and everything to lose: Jane's account tells us Bertha nearly succeeds in strangling Rochester a couple times. When Bertha later sets fire to Thornfield, he again puts himself in danger—this in spite of her

earlier attempt to burn him in his bed—and receives for his rescue attempt the temporary loss of his sight and the more permanent crippling of a hand.

Readers unconvinced that violent internal struggle constitutes a firm commitment to one's unpleasant duty, or that *not* hitting someone is a true act of compassion, need only consider the nature of Bertha's confinement for additional evidence to weigh in the balance. The very circumstance so many modern readers cite when passing judgment on Rochester contains the means by which to exonerate him. Rochester chooses to provide *in-house* care for his mentally ill wife when he might have as easily relocated her. Though unable to divorce his mentally ill wife (391), she could have been removed to an older and more secluded property of his, but a grudging sense of responsibility prevents him from adopting a course of action likely to harm her health:

“I possess an old house, Ferndean Manor, even more retired and hidden than this, where I could have lodged her safely enough, had not a scruple about the unhealthiness of the situation, in the heart of a wood, made my conscience recoil from the arrangement. Probably those damp walls would soon have eased me of her charge: but to each villain his own vice; and mine is not a tendency to indirect assassination, even of what I most hate.” (383)

If Rochester were the mercenary some critics consider him, he would have sent his wife to Ferndean ten years earlier and by now have been legally free to remarry. He also could easily have institutionalized her in one of the period's new asylums,³⁸ an alternative such a wealthy man could have implemented secretly and without fuss³⁹—yet another option that would probably have hastened Bertha's death and Rochester's freedom.

Whatever the clear disadvantages of being locked in a windowless room, Bertha receives rather progressive care for the time period, particularly in light of her violent behavior. Left to the devices of nineteenth-century law, her aggressive tendencies would likely have earned her

much less commodious lodgings in a prison. Presumably, Rochester plays the figure of a bound and fettered Bridewell prisoner so well in a game of charades (230) because he has this particular scenario so often in mind: the predicament at which he is playacting represents the kind of situation from which he has preserved Bertha, and it also symbolizes the sort of psychological incarceration to which he has resigned himself in keeping her alive and healthy. No chains restrain her movement—she moves freely about in what appears to be a sizable room—and she is obviously well fed, having grown quite plump during her confinement (370-71). Her warden's regrettable inclination towards drink does mean Bertha slips out of her cell occasionally and wanders dangerously about Thornfield, but Charlotte takes pains to mitigate Grace Poole's failing here (and, by association, Rochester's decision to trust his wife's well-being to such a person). Rochester explains to Jane that Grace, like the surgeon he also hired to care for Bertha, is a trained professional; that most of the time Grace proves a very able and knowledgeable keeper; and that her alcoholism is an understandable, if unfortunate, condition "incident to her harassing profession" (370-72, 395).⁴⁰

Like Charlotte and her sisters, Rochester recognizes the stress and anxiety that can attend protracted care of a family member with a disordered mind. After all, Rochester did not immediately place his disturbed wife in others' hands; he lived with the ever-worsening Bertha for nearly four years before relegating her to the watchful eye of Grace Poole back in England (390-91). It takes the presumption born of twenty-first century medical knowledge and innovative therapeutic techniques, coupled with—let us be honest—a widespread lack of extended and personal experience with disordered minds, to be able to categorize Rochester's actions as those of a self-serving libertine. The drug regimens and out-patient behavior modification programs offered by today's doctors could probably have extended Bertha's "lucid

intervals” (394) into days and weeks, allowing Bertha to live a reasonably routine life, but Rochester had no such tools at his disposal. Whatever his failures in love and perseverance—and once the secret is out he openly admits to most of these (392)—his commitment to Bertha’s continued health and his unwillingness to see her handed over to strangers mark his actions as surprisingly responsible.

Creative Transmogrification Number One: Branwell as Mentally Disabled Cretin

As Juliet Barker has noted in *The Brontës* (1994), Charlotte showed some discomfort with her decision to avoid current events when writing *Villette*. The author turned from the fashionable “social novel” she had attempted in *Shirley* (1849) with mixed feelings, bemoaning in a letter to George Smith her supposed inability to tackle important and uncomfortable topics as successfully as, say, Harriet Beecher Stowe (714). Barker suggests that guilt from this omission in *Villette* may have prompted Charlotte to interrupt her work regimen during a London visit so that she could visit Newgate Prison and Bedlam (713-14), the residences for a good many of the era’s mentally ill and mentally disabled individuals. Neither Barker nor Charlotte herself appears to grant, however, that *Villette* does indeed grapple with current events, taking on the same mental health issues Charlotte presumably considered during one day’s urban exploration in 1853. In the last fictional representation of Branwell’s malady created by the Brontë siblings, the sister injured most by his decline and recent death reconfigures his mental disorder and outrageous conduct as the severe cognitive disability and highly unmanageable behavior of one Marie Broc, a “crétin” (218) placed under the care of the narrator during a school holiday.

Charlotte tackles the topic of idiocy the more effectively for engaging it obliquely and avoiding over-dependence on popular stereotypes. In this, she dodges the pattern of configuration in Dickens's earlier novels, and adopts a strategy more consistent with those later, more enlightened works such as *Little Dorrit* (1857) and *Our Mutual Friend* (1865). Charlotte refuses to fit her idiotic creation into one of the prefabricated, constricting molds conventionally cast for such characters by literary tradition. The student Marie Broc does not serve as an innocent foil for some more calculating nearby character, nor does she play other archetypal roles often assigned the idiot, like that of the wise fool or the unwitting catalyst.⁴¹ Marie's tangential position relative to the main action and the brevity of her appearance actually allow a higher degree of mimesis to be achieved than would be possible with a more fully developed and central but typecast figure. Lucy's conflicted attitude towards Marie also heightens the novel's realism, recreating the same kinds of tension that characterized relations between the Huntingdons and between the Rochesters, a by now familiar oscillation between duty and revulsion. Charlotte rejects any two-dimensional representation of the idiot's character and situation in favor of a layered image, one which undercuts our dismissal of Marie as a mere type by effectively delineating her liminal social status, her behavioral complexity, and the wide array of reactions evoked by her presence.

Though the reader only observes Marie Broc's actions within the limited space bounded by the pensionnat de demoiselles' walls, we learn more about her when Lucy Snowe describes the attitude of those family members who cannot seem to decide what to do with Marie, a dilemma that results in the girl's repeated relocation. Sent to a school far from her stepmother's presence—a rejection this surrogate parent renews when she refuses to receive Marie during the school's long holiday (218)—the displaced girl must wait a month for an elderly aunt to gather

her and bestow some needed compassion and affection (220). The opposing postures adopted by these different family members resemble the warring impulses present within both Lucy Snowe and her future love interest M. Paul whenever they turn to face this special needs student, though the two instructors also evince a shared commitment to staying the course—whatever difficulties Miss Broc may present.

Marie's presence routinely evokes conflicted emotions in the elder, more experienced of the two educators. Though M. Paul's relationship with Marie has never evolved beyond that of a teacher and student, he nevertheless exhibits heightened, violently conflicting emotions in her presence. As Lucy describes it:

Marie Broc was well known to M. Paul; he never gave a lesson in the third division (containing the least advanced pupils), that she did not occasion in him a sharp conflict between antagonistic impressions.
(289)

Marie's repugnant appearance, manners, and temperament regularly combine to disgust and offend the instructor's refined sensibilities. The sad particulars of her situation also stir pity, however, a latent compassion that bolsters M. Paul's failing patience. Lucy tells the reader (with perhaps a bit of veiled glee) that the resulting inner conflict has played itself out on a daily basis: though M. Paul's compassion and integrity frequently gain the upper hand, apparently those moments when his self-control fails provide quite the spectacle (289).

Lucy's own experience with Marie is equally varied, again recalling the conflicting emotions experienced by Branwell's sisters over the course of his illness. The description Lucy first offers the reader, once classes have ended and her new duties as personal nurse and entertainer have begun in earnest, paints her young charge as more docile and submissive than otherwise:

The crétin did not seem unhappy. I did my best to feed her well and

keep her warm; and she only asked food and sunshine, or when that lacked, fire. Her weak faculties approved of inertia: her brain, her eyes, her ears, her heart slept content; they could not wake to work, so lethargy was their Paradise. (219)

Her physical needs met, Marie appears passive and at ease. She has not yet exhibited any remarkable volition or self-consciousness, effectively keeping the reader from attempts to trace her character. Nor do we know her name at this point, a detail Lucy withholds until describing her experience to M. Paul some four chapters later. Lucy's description of Marie in negative terms—she “did *not* seem *unhappy*”—prevents us from unequivocally assigning Marie even the simplest emotion; she remains an innocuous enigma. A page and five weeks later, however, we find Lucy deeply relieved at the departure of one she now considers a “heavy charge” (220). Lucy's second representation of Marie's character provides a heavy counterweight to her earlier, more casual description:

I could not leave her a minute alone; for her poor mind, like her body, was warped: its propensity was to evil. A vague bent to mischief, an aimless malevolence made constant vigilance indispensable. (220)

Marie now appears an entirely different person, a distressingly insubordinate burden to the weary and bitter attendant who has watched her for over a month.

Lucy's two very different stances towards Marie authentically capture that emotional flux which often characterizes the person who has given sustained attention and energy to an individual with such unrelenting needs. Lucy's tirade does verge on the insensitive and register some of the commonplace prejudices of her time⁴²—she likens Marie Broc's facial distortions and “indescribable grimaces” to those of “some strange tameless animal” (220)—but then, her situation demands much of her. Her euphemistic description of “personal attentions” which “required the nerve of a hospital nurse” and at times drove her “faint to the fresh air” or took from her “the power and inclination to swallow a meal” likely included rather messy familiarity

with the most intimate bodily functions of her grooming-challenged charge. While those working for years in the country's workhouses and either public or private madhouses would have gradually become inured to these conditions along with their fellow workers, such protracted duties likely tried many a Victorian man or woman who chose to perform them within a private care environment, unaccompanied by the ameliorating presence or assistance of a professional. Lucy is obviously no Grace Poole.

Mrs. Poole, braced by alcohol, encouraged by high wages, and hardened to her charge's violence by repeated exposure, accustoms herself to a kind of social deprivation to which Lucy and many a caregiver of the mentally challenged have difficulty resigning themselves. Lucy desires the kind of intelligent exchange and community conspicuously absent from a nurse-patient dynamic in which the patient's mental disorder prevents prolonged, coherent discourse. As with many of Charlotte's heroines, Lucy embraces only temporary or tempered brands of solitude, pursuing the quiet respite afforded by the alley between the two schools (149-50), and choosing solitude only after repeated, failed attempts to connect with the fellow teachers interested in her companionship (175). Lucy still hopes for connection; a society of two may suffice, but it must entail real communion, a sharing of sympathies and ideas. Thus, she can enjoy caring for the initially demanding and irritable Miss Marchmont—a situation identical in many particulars to that later forced on her by Madame Beck—because this earlier post allows for a meeting of minds:

Two hot, close rooms thus became my world; and a crippled old woman, my mistress, my friend, my all. Her service was my duty—her pain, my suffering—her relief, my hope—her anger, my punishment—her regard, my reward. I forgot that there were fields, woods, rivers, seas, an ever-changing sky outside the steam-dimmed lattice of this sick-chamber; I was almost content to forget it. All within me became narrowed to my lot . . . disciplined by destiny, I demanded no walks in the fresh air . . . she gave me the originality of her character to study: the steadiness of

her virtues . . . the power of her passions . . . the truth of her feelings . . .
All these things she had, and for these things I clung to her. (50)

Lucy does not feel trapped within the confines of this earlier, very limiting and demanding situation simply because of the compensatory, metaphysical freedom she achieves through conversation with her engaging companion.

In a clear echo of the difficulty Branwell presented to his family in his more inebriated states, Charlotte's heroine fails to make any substantial connection with Marie Broc; nothing alleviates the alternately exasperating and brain-numbing circumstances of this second, claustrophobic care environment. As she tells M. Paul, "'I washed her, I kept her clean, I fed her, I tried to amuse her; but she made mouths at me instead of speaking'" (290). The reader may in good conscience dismiss M. Paul's jab that an absence of feminine courage, charity, and long-suffering has caused the strong-willed Lucy to fall ill after caring for Marie (continuing in his characteristically mean but playful mode, he notes that *some* women tend "hospitals-full of similar unfortunates," 290). We must join M. Paul, however, in questioning Lucy's claim that some "nervous fever" contributed more to her sickness than the strain of tending Marie (290-91). Lucy's attempted defense here and earlier in the novel only succeeds in betraying her understandable vulnerability to isolation and the rigors of her unusual assignment. When first describing that physical labor and acutely "wasting and wearing" mental distress engendered by a month of nursing Marie, Lucy adds, "but this duty *never* wrung my heart, or brimmed my eyes, or scalded my cheek with tears hot as molten lead" (220, my emphasis), a hollow declaration which collapses under the salience of its own, numerous metaphors. As we see through Lucy's facade, we begin to understand the depth of her frustration at failing to care for her difficult companion with more understanding and fortitude.

Obviously, the social environment which shapes the dynamic between ward and guardian impacts the receiver of care as well as the caretaker. Lucy can tell us more about the experience of the *caregiver* given her own position relative to Marie, but elsewhere Lucy appears quite aware of the ways in which incarceration can affect the confined, an effect shaped variously by the presence, or absence, of others. Many individuals institutionalized by the government or their family members did not receive the conscientious treatment Lucy attempts to give Marie. Despite recent gestures towards more compassionate and less abusive treatment in both asylums and prisons, some still found themselves the victims of archaic practice, of emotional, verbal, and even lingering physical abuse. If they carried no clinical diagnosis with them into incarceration, they often exited with disorders aplenty. As Anthony Masters notes in *Bedlam* (1977), sanity could be quickly overcome by a mix of “fear, proximity to the insane, mechanical restraint, purges, cold baths and bleeding” (70), circumstances which unhappily continued to exist in scattered institutions well into the Victorian period. Ironically, total *isolation* from abusive warders and physical danger could prove just as harmful, the accompanying social and sensory deprivation worsening the conditions of already disordered minds, and creating psychological trauma where it did not previously exist. Reflecting on the use of enforced solitude in punishing prisoners, Lucy remarks:

The world can understand well enough the process of perishing for want of food: perhaps few persons can enter into or follow out that of going mad from solitary confinement. They see the long-buried prisoner disinterred, a maniac or an idiot!—how his senses left him—how his nerves, first inflamed, underwent nameless agony, and then sunk into palsy—is a subject too intricate for examination, too abstract for popular comprehension. (392)

Like many of Charlotte’s heroines, Lucy proves particularly sensitive to the extremes of community and solitude, recognizing that we all—sane and insane, genius and idiotic

alike—seek a healthy balance of interdependence and autonomy, of rule and freedom. One wonders to what degree Charlotte felt her brother had been offered such balance at home, and whether she implicated herself and her family at all in the disequilibrium that dominated his life.

Creative Transmogrification Number Two: Branwell as Spectral Menace

As Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* suggests, the domestic space itself could indeed operate as a primary site and *source* of mental problems, one in every respect as dangerous as the prison environment censured by her sister's later heroine. Philippe Pinel, a French mental health reformer contemporary with William Tuke, considered the "repulsive spectacle of debauchery, of dissensions, and shameful distress" visible in many of his contemporaries' *homes* "the most fertile source of insanity we treat in the hospitals."⁴³ Nearly two hundred years later, Foucault would take to task the progressive York Retreat itself, a Quaker institution where some of the Brontës' mentally challenged contemporaries appeared to find that good measure of equilibrium evading Branwell.⁴⁴ Foucault claims that the improved material conditions of the patients at York were offset by that omnipresent, guilt-inducing "prestige of patriarchy" (253) inherent in the very familial schema Tuke had adopted. Foucault argues that this traditionally lauded system actually constricted and repressed its subjects, an exacting view some medical historians since have softened but largely adopted.⁴⁵ Even in the most promising care environment, that is, quality of care would depend more on caregiver intent than on the more quantifiable variables of location, a professional's level of training, and patient-to-staff ratio. That the home has long held the potential to cause at least as much psychological and physical damage as an overcrowded government penitentiary or private asylum will surprise few in our time. In a move informed by Emily's experience with Branwell's illness—an illness shaped in part by the Reverend Brontë's

somber leniency⁴⁶ and his daughters' growing ambivalence towards their beloved brother—*Wuthering Heights* would directly implicate the family in the creation of both idiocy and insanity.

The characters of *Wuthering Heights* live closer than most to the miasma of mental disorder, inhaling its vapors as readily as the fog off the moors. Like phantoms lingering around every corner, mental disability and mental illness maintain an invisible but ubiquitous presence throughout the narrative, penetrating the domestic spaces of both *Wuthering Heights* and Thrushcross Grange. They operate like disembodied spirits that can enter into and possess one at any moment—spirits to be eluded, courted, or directed. In Emily's novel, mental disorder provides another vehicle for the characters' many and varied fears, infiltrates their common figures of speech and, in certain situations, serves as an agent of chaos sent to pass into and inhabit an adversary's psyche. *Wuthering Heights* does not include the framed vignettes of insanity or idiocy found in Charlotte's work, where mental defect is (at least in part) tied to a congenital condition or to inheritance. Emily's fiction taps into various, contemporary notions of such disabilities as either contagious, self-created, or spiritually generated. She conceives mental disorder, in other words, as something that can *happen* to *anyone*—even to those who, like her brother, exhibit no obvious predisposition towards mental difficulties of any kind.

Lunacy constitutes perhaps the most likely and imminent type of mental disorder in *Wuthering Heights*, one towards which any number of characters are either drawn by an irresistible attraction or shoved by an antagonist. It takes a simple push to send many of them careening over the edge into that dark, chaotic gulf so feared by the Brontës' able-minded contemporaries. What initially appears to be the histrionics of a spoiled child, for instance, turns out to be Cathy I's fantastic ability to self-induce delirium, sickness, and prolonged mental

illness; even the skeptical housekeeper Nellie finally recognizes Cathy's power to compromise her own health at will. The anti-hero Heathcliff oscillates between desiring and spurning such madness, craving the disequilibrium of insanity if it can be induced by his dead lover's haunting spirit (204) and much later spurning such mental disorder when triggered by the increasingly irritating presence of young Cathy II (393). No such ambiguity hinders his eagerness to inflict mental disability on others, however. Winning Hindley Earnshaw's property out from beneath him and displacing him as lord of the manor drives Heathcliff's enemy to despair and alcoholism. Eventually, Heathcliff can candidly tell Joseph that the maddened Hindley now belongs in an asylum (219), the perfect, socially acceptable location for someone Heathcliff needs to get out of the way without becoming legally entangled in his inevitable demise.

In *Wuthering Heights*, mental disability provides a companion menace to the more standard, traditionally Gothic threat of mental illness. Nellie Dean, that self-proclaimed emblem of Victorian sensibilities and social conventions, appears particularly wary of this particular mental defect. When Heathcliff unwittingly saves Hareton after the boy jumps out of his father's arms and over the banister, she cries out angrily at Hindley, ""Injured! . . . "if he's not killed, he'll be an idiot! Oh! I wonder his mother does not rise from her grave to see how you use him"" (93). Though the specter of idiocy will eventually return to haunt Hareton, for the time being he remains unharmed, his faculties in perfect working order. The specter of idiocy also appears when Cathy I lies ill after more of her self-induced hysterics, a slow and insidious process of mental disintegration replacing physical trauma as the probable cause of cognitive dysfunction. Nellie notes that ""[t]he doctor, on examining the case for himself, spoke hopefully . . . of its having a favourable termination, if we could only preserve around her perfect and constant tranquility. To me, he signified the threatening danger was not so much death, as *permanent*

alienation of intellect” (160, my emphasis). Nellie glimpses the ghost of intellectual disability a third time when she looks upon the broken-down figure of Linton in the days preceding his death. In the distressed state wrought by his father’s threats and various unnamed abuses, Linton hangs onto Cathy II with frantic desperation, a clear sign to Nellie of impending mental disorder: ““What was filling him with dread, we had no means of discerning, but there he was, powerless under its gripe, and any addition seemed capable of shocking him into idiocy”” (327).

Of course, as Robert Browning’s poetry has demonstrated (chp. 4), there lies a certain, unavoidable ambiguity in the relative meanings of these terms. To what degree Nellie believes others are truly approaching clinical states of “madness” or “idiocy” remains vague in part because of these labels’ slipperiness; these two words in particular have long moved easily between figurative and literal usages, and have sometimes been used interchangeably. The mere frequency with which terms like “idiot,” “fool,” “wild,” and “mad” dart about *Wuthering Heights* requires little illumination here: the language of mental disability floats within reach of every character, all of whom employ it metaphorically for dramatic emphasis. More noteworthy are characters’ attempts to slip these words past the thin boundary dividing the real from the figurative, thereby mapping disabled qualities onto normal-functioning individuals—an act more menacing than might at first appear. As George Lakoff notes in *Women, Fire and Dangerous Things* (1987), the metaphors that inform our language not only reflect our preconceptions and experience, but in turn regulate and actively shape that experience. The attentive reader of *Wuthering Heights* will recognize in the figurative usage of terms that denote idiocy the hostile attempt to inscribe certain aspects of intellectual disability onto another person. Some such actions prove more deliberate and successful than others. Lockwood, for instance, unconvincingly uses such vocabulary to rationalize his quick desertion of a woman he recently

met, attributing to her less understanding than an idiot (7). Heathcliff randomly flings the twin appellations of “idiot” and “fool” at the family servant, Joseph, after listening to his heated and therefore largely unintelligible complaint about the destruction of his garden (Joseph’s emotional state has made his heavy brogue more incomprehensible than usual, 387-88). Both Lockwood and Heathcliff, that is, try to dismiss individuals who exasperate them by associating the culprits with the limited intelligence of a cognitively disabled person.

Elsewhere, such flippant gestures become more determined efforts. The adult Heathcliff knows what it is to have the apparatus of idiocy thrust upon one within the domestic space and means to have his appropriate revenge. In the wake of Mr. Earnshaw’s death years earlier, he had gradually adopted the character profile of an idiot, a profile consonant with the condescendingly low expectations of him made by his new and surly guardian, young Hindley. As Nellie Dean noted in her description of Heathcliff at age sixteen, the boy proved rather adept at assuming this new disposition. Heathcliff’s appearance “sympathized with mental deterioration; he acquired a slouching gait, and ignoble look: his naturally reserved disposition was exaggerated into an almost idiotic excess of unsociable moroseness” (84). He adopted “an impression of inward and outward repulsiveness,” a convincing mask of limited intelligence which, as Nellie notes, he eventually manages to discard (84). The Heathcliff who returns to Wuthering Heights years later has cast off the accoutrements of idiocy and stands ready to fasten them onto another’s shoulders. He takes hold of his enemy’s son and begins shaping Hareton into an idiot-like simpleton, thus broadening his programme of revenge against the father by counteracting his own, unintentional rescuing of the boy years earlier. The thick web of constricting language and limited expectations that Heathcliff spins around Hareton narrows the latter’s mind, completely changing the course of his development. Heathcliff takes a lad with

what Nellie considers a promising physiognomy and “a wealthy soil that might yield luxuriant crops under other and favourable circumstances,” and shapes him into a proud, illiterate, morally obtuse brute, one totally dependent on Heathcliff’s instruction (241, 267). Heathcliff takes the greater pleasure in enforcing such an atavistic state onto Hareton because the latter’s nature once held such promise:

If he were a born fool I should not enjoy it half so much. But he’s no fool; and I can sympathise with all his feelings, having felt them myself . . . I’ve got him faster than his scoundrel of a father secured me, and lower; for he takes a pride in his brutishness. (267)

By abusing his access to a co-inhabitant of the domestic space in this way, by in essence *creating* a mental disorder where none should have existed, Heathcliff demonstrates the enormous power for good or ill wielded by even the non-professional, untrained caregiver.

The novel underscores the formative power of the guardian still further by showing how that very domestic environment which can foster mental disorder can also operate in such a way as to *counteract* such a state. Cathy II’s initial, condescending interactions with Hareton demonstrate the success of Heathcliff’s villainous plan and serve to delimit Hareton further, while the intimacy she later develops with the boy within the domestic space of Wuthering Heights will provide the means to Hareton’s recovery. When Hareton misunderstands her question regarding the description over the Heights’ front door, Cathy II asks Linton seriously whether Hareton is “simple—not right?” (268), a conclusion the malicious Linton attempts to reinforce by observing to Hareton, ““My cousin fancies you are an idiot”” (269). Cathy’s initial behavior reflects her society’s common prejudices against the mentally and intellectually disadvantaged. Where her teasing and growing condescension towards Hareton discourage his repeated attempts to move beyond his idiot-like state (303-4, 375-79), however, her eventual shift towards a friendly and more encouraging posture reverses this decline and begins to pull

Hareton out of his mental torpor. Ignored by the now preoccupied Heathcliff, Hareton falls into the able hands of Cathy II, who now seeks to revitalize Hareton's mind and claim his friendship. The task proves difficult; her feisty charge vividly remembers her recent ridicule and fights her advances, but only for a time. She eventually reaches him and slowly begins to disprove Heathcliff's claim that Hareton would "never be able to emerge from his bathos of coarseness and ignorance" (267). Cathy II effectively transforms the Heights from a prison—an asylum that breeds idiocy and madness—into a nurturing, educational care environment; her acceptance of Hareton and the confidence she shows in him despite his coarse ignorance help reclaim him from the limited, brutish role of hard laborer to which Heathcliff had relegated him. If only Branwell Brontë could have been so mended.

The subject of mental disorder—broadly configured—served a twofold function for Anne, Charlotte, and Emily Brontë. Mental illness and mental disability provided the acute writers with culturally relevant topics worthy of exploration during a time when such study was becoming more and more the province of a few professionals in enclosed institutions. It also provided the sisters a more personally beneficial opportunity, a safe, therapeutic arena in which to grapple with their complex feelings towards Branwell. Placed against the context of their family life, the sisters' fictional treatments of both idiocy and lunacy appear to be attempts to reconcile their weariness with the calls of affection and responsibility. Their works collectively remind the modern reader that working with the intellectually disabled has and always will require just this kind of flexibility and determination.

Emily's work adds an additional dimension. By illuminating the domestic space's potential to exacerbate as well as ameliorate the conditions of a disordered mind, she may be

pointing the finger back at her own family. Perhaps more overt shows of support for Branwell's poetry and greater sympathy after his distressful experience with Mrs. Robinson would have helped alleviate his suffering. Or maybe more direct, hands-on action by willing family members could have benefited him, forcing confrontations that might have helped him turn himself around. What if their father had enacted a more proactive regimen of restricted funds and limited mobility, forcing Branwell to confront his self-destructive behavior before it had a chance to kill him?

Aware of the active role for good or bad that intimates can play in the home, but perhaps unwilling or unable to assume a more active role themselves in this positively patriarchal space, *imaginative* engagement with Branwell's condition may have seemed the most plausible option for three women determined to work through their family's pain.

Notes

¹ Juliet Barker notes that early in 1832, Aunt Branwell had chosen to subscribe to *Fraser's*, "which, though less interesting to the children than *Blackwood's*, was nevertheless better than nothing." Juliet Barker, *The Brontës* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1994) 179.

² See Charlotte Brontë, *The Letters of Charlotte Brontë* (hereafter abbreviated as *LCB*), ed. Margaret Smith, Vol. 1: 1829-1847 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995) 88.

³ "The Philosophy of the Insane," *Fraser's Magazine for Town and Country* 25.149 (May 1842) 553.

⁴ Philosophy, 553.

⁵ Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, Trans. Richard Howard (1961; New York: Vintage, 1988) 67.

⁶ Jonathan Andrews, Asa Briggs, Roy Porter, Penny Tucker and Keir Waddington, *The History of Bethlem* (London: Routledge, 1997) 124.

⁷ To this particular motivation, Anthony Masters later adds a more extensive list of disturbing reasons relatives were sometimes put away: "Madhouse patients were sometimes the victims of bizarre family intrigues. Husbands who wished to live harmoniously with their mistresses committed their wives to madhouses. The revenge of a dissatisfied husband could have the same horrifying result. Young girls were incarcerated when their parents attempted to break unsuitable love affairs, and other quite sane individuals ended up in the houses as a result of drunkenness, ill temper or evangelism. Inconvenient relatives or friends could be shut away and declared insane for reasons of gain or inheritance." Anthony Masters, *Bedlam* (London: Michael Joseph, 1977) 64, 70.

⁸ David Wright, *Mental Disability in Victorian England: The Earlswood Asylum 1847-1901* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001) 40-43.

⁹ Andrews et al., 100-101.

¹⁰ Masters, 25.

¹¹ Andrews et al., 100, 327. Masters, 45.

¹² To Francis H. Grundy (22 May 1842), *The Brontës: Their Lives, Friendships and Correspondence* (hereafter abbreviated as *LFC*), eds. T. J. Wise and J. A. Symington (Philadelphia: Porcupine Press, 1980) 1:263-64.

¹³ Francis Henry Grundy, *Pictures of the Past* (1879) 86. Cited in *LCB*, 1:433.

¹⁴ Margaret Smith, notes to *LCB*, 1:88.

¹⁵ To J. B. Leyland (Early in Oct 1846), *LFC*, 1:113-14.

¹⁶ Margaret Smith, *LCB*, 88, 91. Elizabeth Gaskell, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, vol. 1, (London: Sampson, 1857) 332.

¹⁷ “For the rest of the year Branwell’s behaviour, despite his sporadic efforts to find work and to write poetry, was a dragging burden on the family, who had to suffer his drinking, his bouts of lethargy, and fits of irritability. In spite of this, his sisters were trying to conquer their own depression by writing.” Margaret Smith, *LCB*, 15.

¹⁸ To Ellen Nussey (1 Nov 1848), cited in *LCB*, 1:551.

¹⁹ A. H. Preston, “John Greenwood and the Brontës, *Brontë Society Transactions*, Vol. 12. Part 61, 35-38.

²⁰ To Ellen Nussey (17 Dec 1841), *LCB*, 1:275-76.

²¹ To Branwell Brontë (1 May 1843), *LCB*, 1: 316-17.

²² To Ellen Nussey (13 Jan 1845), *LCB*, 1:380-81.

²³ To Ellen Nussey (31 July 1845), *LCB*, 1:411-14.

²⁴ “Branwell still remains at home and while he is here—you shall not come—I am more confirmed in that resolution the more I know of him—I wish I could say one word to you in his favour—but I cannot—therefore I will hold my tongue.” To Ellen Nussey (4 Nov 1845), *LCB*, 1:432-33.

²⁵ To Ellen Nussey (3 March 1846), *LCB*, 1:455-56.

²⁶ To W. S. Williams (2 Oct 1848), *LCB*, 2: 122-23.

²⁷ To Ellen Nussey (17 June 1846), *LCB*, 1:477-79.

²⁸ To Ellen Nussey (31 July 1845), *LCB*, 1:411-14.

²⁹ To Ellen Nussey (30 Dec 1845), *LCB*, 1:441-42.

³⁰ To Ellen Nussey (31 July 1845), *LCB*, 1:411-14. Each of the sisters regularly responded to this call of responsibility, though perhaps not all with equal diligence or animation. Juliet Barker argues that Emily little deserves the reputation she has as the most compassionate of the child prodigies, especially with regards to her posture towards Branwell, “as all the evidence points to the fact that she was so absorbed in herself and her literary creations that she

had little time for the genuine suffering of the family.” Juliet Barker, *The Brontës* (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 1994) 455.

³¹ As Lyndall Gordon reminds us, Charlotte considered Bertha Mason’s frenzy in *Jane Eyre* to be “‘but too natural’, a form of ‘moral madness, in which all that is good or even human seems to disappear from the mind . . . ,’” a dramatization of mental disorder likely grounded in the reality of Charlotte’s encounters with her maddened brother. See Lyndall Gordon, *Charlotte Brontë: A Passionate Life* (New York: Norton, 1994) 134.

³² Nina Schwartz, “No Place Like Home: The Logic of the Supplement in *Jane Eyre*,” *Jane Eyre: Case Studies in Contemporary Criticism*, ed. Beth Newman (Boston: Bedford Books, 1996) 558-59.

³³ Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, “A Dialogue of Self and Soul: Jane Eyre,” *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, second edition (1979; New Haven: Yale UP, 2000) 356.

³⁴ Maria Edgeworth’s best-known novel relates the history of the Rackrent family and their worsening fortunes across four generations. Sir Kit Rackrent, one of the greediest descendants, marries a rich Jewess and then locks her in her room when she will not part with her diamonds. She emerges only after his death. Maria Edgeworth, *Castle Rackrent*, 1800, *Castle Rackrent; and, Ennui*, ed. Marilyn Butler (London: Penguin, 1992).

³⁵ John Monro, an influential doctor working in the last half of the eighteenth century, “saw insanity as the result of ‘a vitiated judgment,’ and it was on this rationale that he justified physical treatment and restraint.” Masters, 53. Similarly, John Barlow argues in *Man’s Power over himself to Prevent or Control Insanity* (1849) that willpower and proper decision-making can alone ward off madness. Vieda Skultans, *Madness and Morals: Ideas on Insanity in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975) 14.

³⁶ Margaret Smith, notes to *Jane Eyre* (New York: Oxford World Classics, 2000) 480.

³⁷ See Frances Power Cobbe, “Wife-torture in England,” 1878, *Criminals, Idiots, Women and Minors: Victorian Writing by Women on Women*, ed. Susan Hamilton (Ontario: Broadview Press, 1995) 132-71.

³⁸ Margaret Smith suggests that most (not all) of the textual evidence places the novel’s events in the 1820s and 1830s. Smith, notes to *Jane Eyre*, 483.

³⁹ Even her brother, Mr. Mason, could not have complained very loudly given his own family’s established familiarity with institutions.

⁴⁰ Interestingly, some accounts suggest that Branwell’s period of decline corresponded with and perhaps precipitated a drinking problem in the Reverend Patrick Brontë himself. Margaret Smith, notes to *LCB*, Vol. I, 333, 339, 503-4.

⁴¹ Patricia Pucinelli delineates five distinct roles typically played by fictional configurations of the character with mental retardation, those of yardstick, wise fool, catalyst, window pane, and accessory. Patricia Pucinelli, *Yardsticks: Retarded Characters and Their Roles in Fiction* (New York: Peter Lang, 1995).

⁴² Henry Maudsley provides one example of this tendency to associate mental disorder with bestiality; he pairs idiocy with such disparate animals as the ape and goose (246-48). Henry Maudsley, "The Animality of Idiots," *Body and Mind* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1873) 48-52. Cited in *Madness and Morals: Ideas on Insanity in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Vieda Skultans (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975) 246-51.

⁴³ Foucault, 259.

⁴⁴ Shaped by the moral management theories of William Tuke, the retreat eliminated the physically coarse treatments and restraint so popular elsewhere and substituted a moral code of behavior. Grounded in the kind of Christian theology adopted by the Brontë family, and modeled after a traditional construct of the patriarchal family, the York institute set the English standard for more humane treatment, returning many of its subjects to at least some semblance of self-respect and responsibility.

⁴⁵ Masters, 82-84.

⁴⁶ The sisters must have wondered at the unremitting financial gifts and shows of faith with which their father graced his wayward son. Gordon, 134. Barker 544-45.

Chapter Six

Imaginative Spaces, Tangible Places

Intellectual disability remains the unhoused imbecile of modern academia, an untouchable endlessly circumambulating the fenced-in pale of sociopolitical discourse. The subject has not even earned the status of a village idiot: few recognize the topic, let alone poke fun at it as an embarrassing but accepted familiar of the academic community. Issues surrounding intellectual disability do not command the same attention as those other, more seasoned political positions concerned with “race,” gender, sexual orientation, or class. No humanities journals or conferences foreground mental disability and its related concerns; it remains almost exclusively within the purview of medicine and the social sciences. In the century since the Victorian period ended, mental *illness*—long associated with mental disability in the public consciousness—has proven a far sexier, more popular topic than its cousin. Even among the disability studies faithful, issues surrounding mental retardations and autism spectrum disorders have not commanded the same attention as the modes of physical difference rooted in sensory or mobility impairment. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson’s landmark study *Extraordinary Bodies* (1997) barely touches on intellectual disability, quick references providing only a necessary part of the useful lexicons she provides for the emerging discipline. Sharon Snyder and David Mitchell’s *Narrative Prosthesis* (2000) rightly points out the hierarchies within disability studies that have curtailed fuller critical exploration of intellectual disability issues, but the authors themselves do not spend more than a page or two on the subject in their now-canonical text. Martin Halliwell’s more recent *Images of Idiocy* (2004), a literary and cultural

studies approach to the issue, directly tackles the figure of the “idiot” as everywhere manifest in modern literature and film, but his attention centers on the richly multivalent and symbolic employment of the figure, with virtually no consideration of real-world implications for those with cognitive differences. The academy has yet to claim intellectual disability as its own, either theoretically by foregrounding the population’s concerns in scholarly publications, or practically through acts of cooperative scholarship and community building.

The primary reason for this oversight undoubtedly lies in the very nature of mental disability—what has an academy of intellects to do with a population defined by varying degrees of intellectual *deficiency*? It is comparatively easy to champion those disenfranchised because of their skin color, sex, or a physical disability, as long as some meeting of the minds can occur between the victimized individual, the advocate, and representatives of the oppressive governmental or educational institution. But what if mind itself has been compromised, not temporarily but permanently? In the twenty-first century, as in the nineteenth, individuals in such situations are invariably swept into the custodial care of family and psychiatry. Why think twice about the academic, political, or even social membership of those who cannot offer what we most value? Enfolding those with mental disabilities and layering their experience into our discourses about both art, education, and society will require questioning prejudices so rooted that most of us have not even begun to recognize them. That high, Greco-Roman estimation of human intellect reestablished in the eras of renaissance, enlightenment, industrialization, and scientific enquiry has ground the very lenses through which we peer at our modern world. Putting them aside will be, for many, tantamount to expecting better vision after removing a tried-and-true eye-piece. Everything from technological innovation to social justice to the creative arts’ quest for expression and enlightenment relies, ostensibly at least, on the

accumulation, articulation, proper organization, and effective deployment of accessible bodies of knowledge. Extending membership to those of reduced cognitive functioning and perception constitutes a far more involved venture than extending a hand to the sensory or mobility impaired, because it requires far more than mobilizing new resources and reshaping our aesthetic and corporeal prejudices (challenging enough ends in themselves). According partial or at least provisional academic membership to this widely defined population within the Humanities, for instance, will require extensive flexibility in the face of the current, unspoken standards which demand erudition, “propriety,” and independence from our members. Such a shift will require shaping a sustainable social space that encourages not only coexistence but honest appreciation of another’s unique experiences, whatever their cognitive health and “intellect.” And it will require a reassessment of the relative values we award certain elements of human experience: expressing one’s emotions might step up next to explaining one’s reasoning, interdependence claim a spot alongside autonomy, and storytelling climb higher towards the rarified air accorded scientific analysis.

In other words, such a shift may require re-plotting some of the very points we use to coordinate societal progress, as well as significantly expanding our operational definition of “progress” itself. The many factors complicating the adoption of such an accommodating posture and the creation of such a radically inclusive and diverse community are relatively self-evident. In a cultural milieu attentive to surfaces of all kinds, those with significant disabilities born of trauma or congenital conditions face an even steeper uphill battle than the rest of us. For many diagnosed with intellectual disabilities, manifest singularities in face, carriage, manner, and emotional expressiveness join already discernible physical disabilities and recurring health problems to make “passing” in a crowd virtually impossible. Unable to feign the *normate*’s

beauty, athleticism, vocal cadences, or polished propriety, these individuals face still greater difficulties when they venture into professional settings. Their mental limitations and conspicuous dependence confound others' narrow prescriptions for success—a predictable result in competitive environments that so laud solo accomplishment and intellectual balletics.

Cinematic Reflections on Our Times: Lessons Learned and Rehearsed

It should be clear at this point that nineteenth-century British culture and ideology resemble our own in a number of significant ways. In addition to replicating their preoccupation with narrowly defined ideals of beauty and the body, we too idolize the mind and categorize so as to circumscribe those whose mental powers do not correspond to some intellectual norm. As demonstrated by contemporary cultural artifacts like the popular how-to book series, *The Complete Idiot's Guide to _____* (advertised with the tagline, "You're No Idiot!"), our colloquialisms and figures of speech betray the same glaring attitudinal barriers as theirs did. And, perhaps most egregious of all, the limiting rhetorical roles the masses prescribed for the intellectually disabled reappear in our own stories. Hollywood knows well the potential for comedy and high theatre inherent in the portrayal of relations between intellectually disabled and able-minded individuals. Every few years, the American movie industry offers up some critically acclaimed tale that suggests in microcosm the challenges our society would face were we to embrace this particular population more fully; a small few take the possibility of such relational intimacy seriously, but most dismiss it as a pipe dream under the guise of either satire or tragedy.

A number of these films relate the marked transformation of a comparatively "normal" person which follows upon befriending an intellectually disabled individual. Films such as

Being There (1979) and *Pumpkin* (2002) turn such encounters to comedic purpose, ridiculing by exaggerating the idea that an individual with an intellectual disability could positively impact an able-minded person. Peter Seller's Chauncy "Gardener" and his simplistic descriptions of plant care dazzle everyone he meets; politicians, journalists, and his affluent friends all take his words as profound, metaphorical advice concerning government, business, and personal relations. By the story's close, a wealthy businessman has taken Chauncy's unwitting wisdom to heart and come to terms with his impending death, the businessman's wife has fallen in lust with Chauncy (his failure to respond to her sexual advances only heightens her arousal), and a political elite have convinced themselves the intellectually disabled hero would make the perfect presidential candidate. The young co-ed who falls in love with the physically and intellectually disabled, titular hero of *Pumpkin* experiences a similar attitudinal revolution. Carolyn learns to spurn her sorority's prejudices and her haughty mother's wishes so as to embrace a disabled boy who, by the film's end, has ridiculously matched her transformation with his own, shedding his mobility impairment and slurred speech under the magical influence of requited love. In addition to mocking the idea of the mentally disabled and able-minded forming a close relationship, these two films lean heavily on such old, delimiting stereotypes as the wise idiot, the idiot as plot catalyst, the idiot as clown, and the idiot as a moral yardstick against which other characters can be measured.

In some films, this transformation plays out in more melodramatic fashion: a healthy relationship between the intellectually disadvantaged character and his companion emerges, but only after extended frustration and long, hard effort. The films *Rain Man* (1988) and *I Am Sam* (2002) track the changing relationship between highly motivated, fast-paced and smart protagonists with little time for emotional intimacy, and the intellectually disabled individuals

they crash into in their mad races towards professional success. Only after matching their pace to the more measured strides of Dustin Hoffman's Raymond and Sean Penn's Sam do these other, driven characters begin allocating more time and energy to those close to them. The slick luxury car salesman played by Tom Cruise develops new respect for the long-suffering love interest he has treated as a disposable sex toy, and stops treating his long-lost, autistic brother as an annoying obstacle to the family inheritance. Michelle Pfeiffer's hard-nosed lawyer, tearfully claiming she has benefited more from her relationship with Sam than he has, confirms her new humanity in renewed relationship with her attention-deprived son and in warmer, newly egalitarian relations with her disabled client. In both movies, intellectually sharp but emotionally distant, autonomous individuals with established professional success confront their own emotional sterility and relational obtuseness after gazing into the mirror held up by their intellectually disabled foils. Subsequent attempts to adopt new, more emotionally vulnerable postures towards their valued loved ones provide neatly sentimental counterpoints to what were earlier, failed attempts at communication and relationship.

Though accurate in some of the details, movies like *I Am Sam* suggest an unrealistic relational path that could never be walked down in the domestic sphere, let alone academia. This film in particular implies a necessarily torturous but *cathartic* process that culminates in relatively ideal conditions for all concerned. Supposedly, while the relationship between a disabled adult and his able-minded friends and family may be difficult initially, once a rhythm has been established and a few legal hurdles leapt over, it's all smooth sailing. Disabled Sam gains custody of the child taken from him by the courts, and the conclusion paints the picture of a small, supportive community of peers that will help him provide appropriate care for his daughter. A few other, recent films involve equally unrealistic, counterproductive scenarios that

tend in another, more tragic direction. *Sling Blade* (1996) and *Digging to China* (1998) imply that sustaining close ties with the intellectually disabled is virtually impossible; both suggest that it takes a sensitive, imaginative child with a surplus of free time and an absence of grown-up prejudices to connect with an intellectually disabled adult, and that such a bond cannot survive the rigors of reality (both disabled protagonists end up in institutions following dramatic confrontations with adults).

Less common are cinematic illustrations of more realistic, successful but continually challenging alliances like the brotherly relationships depicted in *What's Eating Gilbert Grape* (1993) and *Dominick and Eugene* (1988). While faithfully capturing the same kinds of behavioral difficulties, emotional capriciousness, and poor decision-making which complicate relations in the aforementioned movies, these two stories openly admit to a never-ending process of relationship-building that requires patience, sensitivity, and a firm commitment to a highly interdependent mode of relationship. When the angst-ridden Gilbert Grape decides, after a narrative predictably filled with family trials and public ignominy, to leave the small town in which he has always lived, he takes his brother Arnie with him. This choice insures that the rest of his life will be as complicated (and enriched) by his brother's unique needs as were the weeks detailed by the film. The movie *Dominick and Eugene* also concludes with the able-minded guardian's leaving home following a series of trying episodes with his brother. Eugene leaves Dominick behind when he departs to pursue his medical career but, significantly, this temporary separation *enables* instead of limiting the intellectually disabled sibling. Far from abandoning Dominick, the over-protective Eugene gives his brother (who is admittedly more capable than Gilbert's profoundly disabled brother Arnie) the chance to attempt supporting himself through his job as a garbage man. Instead of forcing his brother to continue playing the role of protected

and pitied troublemaker à la SMIKE, Eugene extends Dominick a measure of autonomy, knowing he can return whenever new difficulties require his presence.

Practical Possibilities

As we retreat from the flickering fantastic of the movie house—as from the flipping pages of nineteenth-century literature—we can bring something back to the university setting besides sticky shoes and ink-smudged fingers.

The most obvious lesson gleaned from this project is, I hope, the importance of claiming interdependence as a viable rubric for relationships both social and professional. Though some individuals with Asperger's Syndrome and other types of high-functioning autism will be able to function in our universities (and some already do) with little allowance made for their functional differences, something resembling the supportive networks surrounding Arnie, Dominick, Maggie, Sloppy, and Marie Broc will be necessary for many of the others we invite into our professional and personal space. We will need to create real opportunities for ongoing involvement, something more stable and long-term than the brief promises of relationship that collapse around the sick and disabled in Mary Shelley's novels. This will be difficult in such a highly competitive discipline as literary studies, one that does not always encourage cooperative endeavors that diffuse praise across multiple contributors (regardless of those contributors' intellectual acumen). That a profession already beleaguered by funding crunches and—in public eyes—fading consequence would even consider incorporating a population that might imperil its lingering legitimacy seems even more doubtful. And yet, the clarion call of the postmodern era remains *diversity at all costs*, a principle our discipline has championed at least as much as any other discipline has. Surely a field that so values heterogeneity of voice should save a place

around our considerable bonfire for *everyone* with a story to tell. Or does even *our* idealism, like that of the Victorians, have its limits?

A few literary critics and historians have already refused a quiet complacency and begun to point the way to a less combative, more accessible practice that not only accepts but actively privileges the kind of flexibility and cooperation that the intellectually disabled community will require. In the 2000 introduction to the new edition of their feminist classic, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar note how the rise of theory and jargon in recent decades has divorced literary-minded folk “from even the Woolfian ‘common readers’ who used to be [their] off-campus constituency,” and suggest that one of the primary challenges confronting those who study literature in the future will involve, not “[bypassing] methodological sophistication but [harnessing] it to *more accessible* modes of critical writings” (xli, xliv, my emphasis). In an essay entitled “Literary History: Some Roads Not (Yet) Taken” (1995), Virgil Nemoianu discourages the kind of divisive “paradigm worship” that has long characterized literary studies, suggesting a number of alternative modes, including one he christens “reciprocity and gift making” (17). Nemoianu recalls the old practice of dedicating literary productions to a specific and personal audience/patron as inspiration for:

a more general model of literary history and criticism in which writing is deliberately taken as a gift to others . . . or as an exercise in generosity . . . In such a reading the theme of communication . . . interlaces in paradoxical and sweet ways with the theme of love. Literary history would be on the one hand the record of loving gestures, but on the other, critically, an exercise in love . . . which could become the preferred avenue for text cognition . . . Values such as gratitude and praise, politeness and attention, would receive their due, and the substantiality of leisure could be reconsidered. (17-18)

Such a congenial environment, sensitive to the differing needs of all comers, would presumably welcome those requiring extra logistical assistance, offering a safe intellectual atmosphere

analogous to the supportive domestic space envisioned within the film *What's Eating Gilbert Grape* and the novel *Our Mutual Friend*.

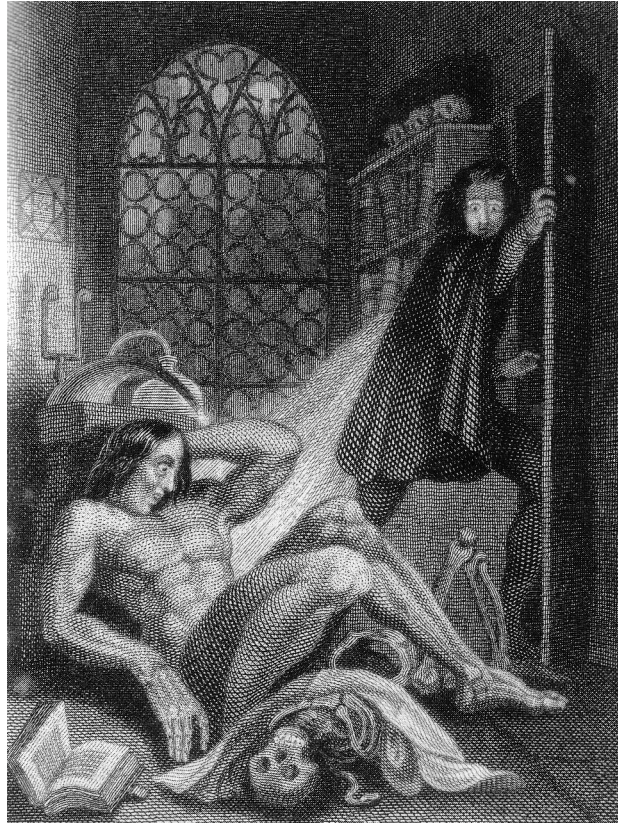
The disability community has already embraced this kind of charitable, cooperative model, not only out of practical necessities tied to mobility and communication concerns, but in recognition of the intellectual benefits that result from melding minds and perspectives. In the preface to *Narrative Prosthesis* (2001), David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder loudly proclaim the deliberately collaborative, “prosthetic” nature of their publishing projects, admitting to a proud interdependence that expands the scope of their work while working to “expose the prosthetic nature of all intellectual endeavor” (xii-xiii). At the 2004 Mid-Atlantic Popular and American Culture Association conference, Ruth Burks (associate professor at Bentley University) put this very kind of interdependence on display. She delivered a presentation on autism spectrum disorders in concert with her autistic son, Gyasi Burks-Abott, a writer who supplemented his mother’s analysis by reading from a draft of his autobiography. The Burk team’s strategy advanced an extremely plausible, reproducible means of involving the mentally disabled in academic endeavor. Mr. Burks-Abott, whose ability to work successfully in an academic library had been regularly compromised by others’ low expectations, found in this small conference room a receptive and responsive audience willing to embrace instead of dismiss his apparent alterity. The mother-son team will face old challenges and prejudices as they continue such cooperative efforts, but have committed themselves to the task at hand.

As the novels of the Brontë sisters remind us, working with those different from ourselves can be quite difficult: we need to advance towards an inclusive community with our eyes wide open. Those of us inspired by the example of teams like Dr. Burks and Mr. Burks-

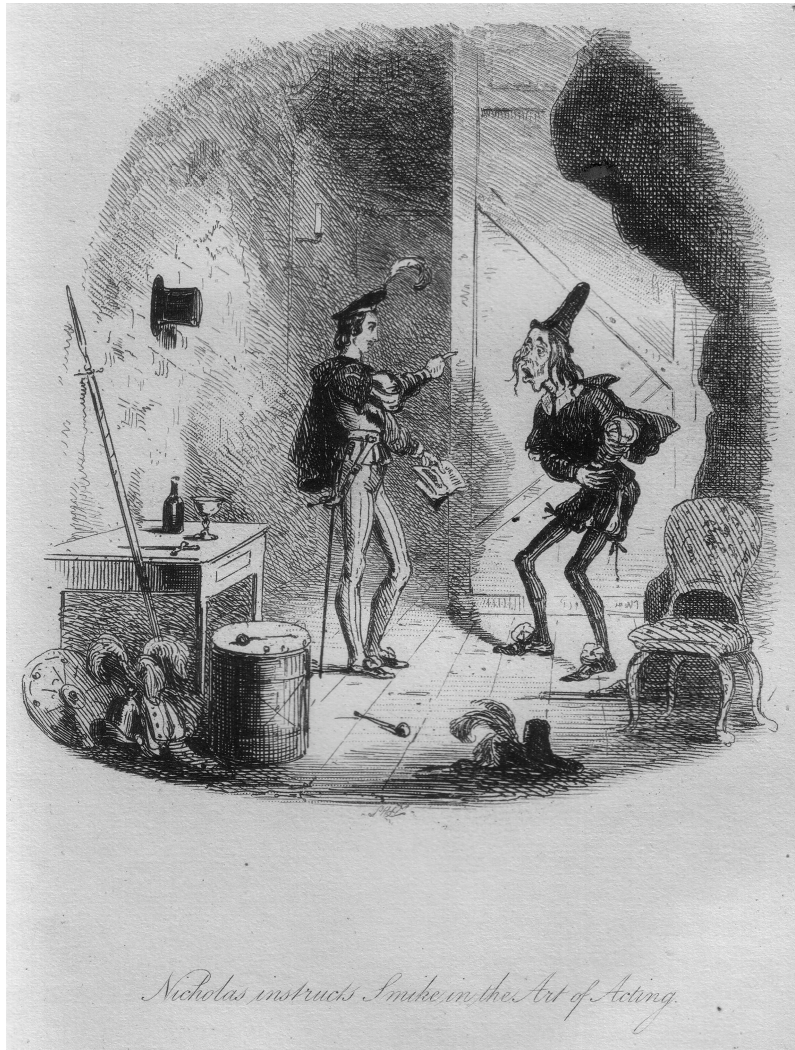
Abott must remember to voice our socio-political concerns about the intellectually disabled without drawing essentializing, reductive conclusions about them. We must also be willing to accommodate some individuals' simpler diction, emotional expressiveness, and unique communication needs, and do so without creating a spectacle like those present in *Being There* and *Nicholas Nickleby*. While no formula can anticipate all possible variables that those with intellectual disabilities will face as they pursue communion with the larger academic community—especially given the enormous range of cognitive disabilities in existence—the process will undoubtedly require flexibility, dedication, and patience from all involved. Matters will likely never become as easy and rosy as those imaged in the conclusions of *I Am Sam* or *Barnaby Rudge*, but they need not remain as bleak as they are at present, either. Unfortunately, the closing scenes of *Sling Blade* and *Digging to China* narrate the untold tale within academia today, except that in our situation, no real attempt at assimilation has preceded the institutionalization and isolation that have effectively silenced the intellectually disabled voice.

As we consider moving towards a more inclusive community, it might be useful to recall the words of Avital Ronell who, in her recent book *Stupidity* (2002), reminds us that intellectual failure is less a social fact and personal trait than it is a fundamental characteristic of human cognition (21, 92), a first-born residing right in the middle of reason and education's nice little nuclear family—not some illegitimate offspring to be kicked out of doors. Our privileging of logic and intellect is sometimes practical, sometimes unnecessary, and often problematic—a last prejudice we seem largely unwilling to interrogate. In the words of Ronell, “What is it about survival that it should become a matter of aptitude or intelligence?” (60).

Appendix A: Frontispiece to the 1831 edition of *Frankenstein*



Appendix B: Smike and Nicholas Nickleby as actors



Nicholas instructs Smike in the Art of Acting.

Appendix C: the children play about Smike's grave



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